



Shout by gothamcitysyren

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Summary: Betsy Reed moved to Hawkins for a fresh start, a safe place to heal after the death of her mother. And it was just that for a while—safe. She made friends of Steve Harrington, Johnathon Byers, and Dustin Henderson. Her heart was opening up again thanks to Billy Hargrove. But just as quickly as the leaves faded from green to brown, so did safe fade to deadly. • Season 2 •

1. Asshole

IT WAS 1984 IN HAWKINS, INDIANA.

Everything was on track for graduation. I knew it was still another year away, but I was proud of myself for making a plan and sticking to it for so long. Summer was spent working in dad's garage and babysitting, and all the money I made went into savings. There was no way I'd waste that.

Dad promised to help out anyway he could, but I knew the state of our finances almost better than he did. If I was going to get to college it would be because I got myself there. That was fine with me—it just meant having some discipline.

I was in the garage all morning putting the final pieces together on my car. It was mostly cleaning it up and reattaching the headlights, but I would've done just about anything to get it running again. This vehicle was like my child. I wasn't going to leave it in Hawkins when I graduated, so I worked hard to keep it working in the meantime without spending my college money.

After that, I was racing to Alice's house because she asked for a ride to school. There's always a surprise when it came to Alice—especially when doing her favors. When I parked at the end of her driveway, she came running from the front door with her friend Trinity. I didn't mind the extra rider, only the fact that it was her.

She seemed nice but, whenever she was around, I could barely get a word in. Alice and Trinity had been friends since they were little—a fact they loved to rub in my face—and therefore I was the odd man out, as usual. It was hard not to feel displaced.

"Hey! Sorry we're running late," Alice said, coming to a screeching halt at my passenger door. She pulled it open and I leaned over to help gently fold the seat forward. "Trin was having hair problems. Again."

"That's such bull—you just *had* to redo your makeup," Trinity argued, as she shoved herself into the backseat.

Alice pushed up the seat and climbed in with a huff, rolling her eyes as she pulled the door closed. As soon as it was shut I was driving. There was no time to waste. Being late to school wouldn't look too good to a college. I needed to be punctual.

Smiling politely, I shook my head, "No, that's okay. I needed some extra time to get Dorothy running anyways."

"You named it?" Trinity made a sound of disgust.

"Shut *up*, Trinity," Alice twisted in her chair to look into the backseat. "It's her mom's car."

I found myself sighing heavily at the mention of my mother. It was nice of Alice to defend me and the naming of my car, but I didn't want Trinity knowing anything about me that she didn't have to know. Having a dead mom wasn't something I used to get into parties.

It was the last topic of conversation possible. Only Alice and Steve knew, though I'd heard some whispers going around when I first got here. That's just how it was in small towns so I didn't really pay attention to it. I'd been in them enough to get used to it. Trying to stay calm for the rest of the drive to school, I turned on the stereo.

Alice touched up her makeup on the way and Trinity was gabbing on about some kind of school gossip. I hated listening to it. It was bad enough everyone's secrets were out there, but then Trinity made me part of the problem by talking about them in front of me. The secrets stopped with me, though they went through many mouths to get there.

Finally, we pulled into the school parking lot and I parked in a space not too far from the entrance. Trinity stopped talking the moment the engine was off. I said a silent *thank you* to anyone upstairs that might be responsible for the silence, before pushing open my door and climbing out with my bag. "Remember to be careful with the door," I said, as Alice started getting out on her side.

"I thought you said you were fixing that last week?" Alice gave me a curious look as she stood from her seat, turning to see me over the

top of the car.

Shrugging, I nodded a little, "Yeah, I did. It's, um...on my list. Still."

"If you need some money for the parts, I can-"

"Really, it's okay- it's not money," I quickly shook my head, shutting my door. "Thanks, though."

But it was. It was always money. I was just fine with my car as long as it worked. Anything else needed were luxury items I could live without. Trinity forced herself out of the backseat in a huff, and Alice had to backpedal quickly to get out of her way. "God, it's so stuffy back there," she complained, pushing past Alice.

Even Alice looked annoyed by Trinity's behavior. She rolled her eyes and shut the door, before sighing heavily. "Trin?" she asked, to get her attention.

"Hm?" Trinity turned to see her as I walked around the back end of the car.

"Stop being a bitch," Alice told her, seriously.

My eyes rounded a bit, and I loosely folded my arms as Trinity began to argue her innocence. It was a lost cause trying to get them to stop bickering whenever they started. So, instead of trying to break it up, I simply started walking toward the school entrance. I only made it a few feet before I was nearly flattened by a car roaring into the lot. It was a blue Camaro, swerving into a spot across the aisle after the near miss. I stood there for a moment in shock before the shock turned into annoyance.

The driver swung their door open, and I couldn't help myself. "Watch it, asshole!" I shouted at the open door.

Out of the car stepped a broad-shouldered mullet with 'trouble' written all over him. He wasn't someone I'd seen at school before, so I assumed he was a new student. But I didn't have time to sit around and wait for a reply. I kept walking toward the school and instead only glanced over my shoulder to see the look he'd given me.

It was a complete and utter lack of care. Really, he seemed annoyed by the interaction if only because I'd been in his way. That was when I decided not to care, either. Under different circumstances, I would be the first person welcoming someone new—after all, I was the most recent newcomer. But this bastard was on his own.

Walking into the school, you could almost feel the excitement. Everyone was excited for Halloween. Tina was handing out flyers for her Halloween bash and, though I didn't plan on going, I took one as I passed through to get to my locker. I didn't go last year either, but the flyer would look great in a scrapbook.

I didn't have time for parties—no one serious about their future did. Then again, I was pretty sure Steve was going to be there. He walked by me as I reached my locker and I held up the flyer. "Hey, did you get one?" I asked him.

He stopped on the other side of me, causing me to turn around to see him. "Oh, yeah," he eyed the flyer in my hand. "You going?"

"I don't think so," I wrinkled my nose.

"What? Come on. You can be the third Stooge with me and Nancy."

"Um, thanks but no thanks. As nice as that sounds, I have work."

I unlocked my locker and pulled open the door, and Steve crossed his arms as his shoulder dropped against the locker next to mine. "Work? On Halloween?" he questioned, skeptical.

"Dorothy's new radiator comes on Wednesday morning and i'm gonna be spending all evening putting it in," I explained, as I situated my things inside the locker. "She shouldn't really be driven until it's in, but she'll be fine as long as I get it on Wednesday."

"Well, I can just drive you until you get it in," Steve offered, pushing off the lockers as I shut mine.

"Why do you want me to go so bad?" I questioned.

He sighed, "Betsy, you rarely do anything fun. This is my last year, okay? I want you to come have fun with me, one last hurrah before I

graduate."

We started walking through the crowded hall as I thought of what he said. It made sense. I hadn't been at Hawkins for long, but Steve was one of my only friends here. And, given his falling out with the 'popular' crowd last year, I was one of his only friends as well. Fixing Dorothy wasn't something I could put off.

I promised I would keep her running and that's what I was going to do. Surely there would be other times Steve and I could have fun before the school year ends, wouldn't there? It sounded a little selfish once I thought it out. "I don't know..." I sighed. "What would I even go as?"

"Uh...Betsy Ross?" Steve supplied, optimistically.

My nose wrinkled again, this time with narrowed eyes as I looked up at him, "You didn't seriously just suggest that."

"Okay, fine. I don't know. You don't have to dress up, you know? No one's gonna care."

"Everyone will care, Steve."

"Just think about it, alright?" he resigned from the conversation with an exasperated sigh. He walked ahead of me, turning on his heels to walk backward in the hall. "You might actually like it."

It was doubtful. I gave him an expression that said as much, but he remained hopeful-looking as he finally turned around and disappeared into the hallway crowd, leaving me to walk to my first class. Something I commonly did alone.

I wasn't late for class—which was a bonafide miracle if I ever saw one. My favorite class was art, but that wasn't until I had to make it through Mr. Dempsey's history lesson. It was always hard not to fall asleep through it. He tried really hard to make it interesting, but it just wasn't interesting enough to keep me awake. Neither was algebra, if I was being honest.

During the car ride to school Wednesday morning, Trinity was going

on about the new gossip she'd heard yesterday while Alice fixed her hair. This round of information was everything she could find out about *Billy Hargrove*—the asshole who almost ran me over in the parking lot. He was a shiny new toy, so obviously all the gossip would be about him.

Even with the radio up I could hear her gabbing. I'd wanted to reach back and slap her but advised myself against it. After all, Trinity was only there because I liked hanging out with Alice. This was the price I had to pay to do that. I wasn't even sure it was worth it anymore.

We made it to school earlier this time and I didn't have to run to class—although, I still walked fairly quickly because I was not about to chance another almost late day. Any time I passed Steve in the halls, he would give me a look I knew meant that I needed to go to the Halloween party. It was in the way he wiggled his eyebrows and eyed me knowingly.

I brushed it off and focused on my classes, but it lingered in the back of my mind. Maybe I would like this party? The last one wasn't so great. But it could be better, what with Steve and Nancy going, too. That way at least I wouldn't be alone and bored out of my mind. I scolded myself for thinking about it.

There was no way I could finish helping out in the garage, replace Dorothy's radiator, *and* make it to Tina's bash. Not unless I had some sort of super speed. It would be difficult to finally tell Steve I wasn't going, but it was a bandage I needed to rip off. So, I found him at his locker after lunch and broke the news.

"I just can't, Steve," I told him, shaking my head. "There's no way I can make it work-"

A group of seniors passed us then, one in particular going out of his way to bump into Steve's shoulder—*hard*. Steve slammed into his now closed locker door with a flail of surprise and the senior responsible turned as he walked away to admonish Steve, "Watch it, Harrington."

It was Billy. With a look of disgust that seemed genuine, as if he actually believed Steve to be at fault for the altercation. Steve only

sighed heavily and rolled his eyes as he righted himself. But I glared heatedly at the new student. His look of disgust faded away as his eyes raked over me, seconds before he continued forward with his classmates.

"What is *wrong* with that guy?" I questioned, to no one in particular.

"Eh, he's got small dick disorder. Don't worry about it," Steve answered, giving a look down the hall before settling on me. "Look—are you sure there's no way you can make it? Not even for a little bit? An hour, maybe? I can pick you up."

Of course Steve wouldn't drop it, and it only made me feel worse to say no. "I don't know...just- I'll call you if I can make it, but just assume I can't, okay?" I answered.

He grumbled a bit, but nodded, and we went our separate ways to class. After school, Alice and Trinity met me out front and the three of us walked to my car. It took me three seconds to notice Billy sat on the trunk of his car, smoking, once again parked in the opposite aisle from mine.

I kept my eyes averted the second I noticed, and I urged the girls along. Trinity didn't even notice me—she was all but drooling, and Alice wasn't much better. Honestly, I thought I had better taste in friends. Sure, Billy Hargrove had a pretty face, but that was his defining quality. It would take a lot more than that to impress me.

There was too much going on in my life to be held up by my friends gawking at some muscles. I walked ahead of them with a heavy sigh and continued toward my car. "Ladies," Billy's acknowledgment of my friends grated on my nerves.

Who did he think he was, anyway? I unlocked the driver's side door and opened as gently as I could with the frustration building in my chest. "Guys, come on," I called to Alice and Trinity, who stood still in the parking lot to talk to Billy. "Do you want a ride or not?"

Trinity was unphased. Alice looked at me for a moment, obviously in indecision, before she shook her head. "That's okay. We'll catch a ride with Tommy," she replied, nonchalantly.

On the surface, it irked me to know that my friends would drop me at a moment's notice if it meant getting five minutes with a hot guy. But underneath that, it just hurt. I tried not to seem bothered as I nodded and slid into the driver's seat, pulling the door shut behind me.

I clipped on my seatbelt and started the car, then turned the radio all the way up as I left the parking lot. If anything was going to help me not break down on the way home it would be music. Alice Jaeger and Trinity Spears were the last people in this town that deserved my tears. Right above Billy Hargrove. It's like someone sent up a flare whenever he needed to be an asshole and ruin someone's day.

Thompson Twins was on the radio and I drowned out most of my thoughts with that. I didn't live too far from the school—the longest part of the drive was always picking up and dropping off Alice and Trinity. But I was still miles from home when a puff of white smoke jolted from the hood of the car. "No. No, no, no, no..." I frantically looked to the gauges.

The needle was all the way on hot. I only noticed it seconds before the engine seized, and I was forced to steer over to the side of the road. It chugged and sputtered and I knew that meant nothing good. I took the keys out of the ignition, popped the hood, and scrambled out of the car to get to the front. It was hot, but I moved quickly to lift up the hood and brace it.

Doing so caused another puff of white smoke to burst up in my face. I stepped back from the front of the car, fanning the smoke away with a choked cough. It was safe to say the radiator needed a break. If not a break, then an immediate replacement. I didn't know if the new radiator came to the garage while I was at school.

The only way to find out was to get home and check. That would require leaving Dorothy on the side of the road and walking. Walking was fine with me, but leaving Dorothy behind for so long wasn't. This was such a mess. I should've replaced it sooner but I only had the money for it a couple weeks ago, and it took two weeks to get it to Hawkins. "Goddammit," I hissed in frustration, turning away from the smoking engine.

This road was empty for at least five miles. If I calculated correctly,

I'd only been on it for two before I pulled over. That means I would only need to walk three miles to the nearest house or place of business. I could get to a phone and get back here in thirty minutes if I ran. Though, I didn't do much everyday running, and I knew I would need to take many breaks. It would only add to the time Dorothy was on the side of the road.

Instinctively, I'd begun to growl thinking about it. One hand on my hip and the other on my chin, I paced slowly on the autumn leaves beside the road, contemplating my options. I could always just sit here and wait for it to cool down and try starting it again. Or, I could wait for a car to drive by and flag it down.

"Betsy?"

A voice caused me to stop thinking, and my feet froze in their place at the sound. Dustin was on his bike on the road, with Mike and Will and Lucas. They were wearing their Ghostbusters costumes—as promised. Exhaling, I tried to smile, "You guys heading home?"

"Yeah. What happened to Dorothy? Is she okay?" Dustin questioned, getting off his bike.

He walked the bike over to where I stood in front of the car, and he peered in at the engine. There was a lot less smoke but it was still way too hot to drive. "She's fine, Dusty. Just overheated," I answered, acting calm.

"Well, do you need a ride?" Dustin offered, stepping back to look up at me. "You could hop on the back, like old times."

This time, my smile was genuine, "Thanks, but I'm gonna wait with her for a bit and see if I can get her started. You guys should get going, though—don't wanna miss prime ghost hunting hours."

"Do you want me to tell my mom you're out here? She can call your dad," Mike suggested, from the road.

"That would be great, actually. Thanks, Mike," I nodded, thankfully.

Dustin walked his bike back to the road and climbed on, but I could tell he was disappointed. We hadn't been hanging out much lately.

Definitely not as much as we did when I babysat him. But since his mom retired, there wasn't much need for a babysitter anymore.

I made a mental note then to add hanging out with Dustin to my to-do list. "Okay, well...have fun tonight, Betsy," Dustin said, as the other began to pedal onward. "I hope you can get her fixed soon."

"Thanks. Hit all the full-size houses first, that way they don't run out by the time you get there," I told him, as he, too, began to pedal.

He chuckled as he rode off, shouting over his shoulder, "Good idea!" before hurrying after the others. As soon as they were gone, I checked the radiator. It was still incredibly too hot. The thing was most likely toast. But I tried to stay as optimistic as possible about it, and decided to do some sketching while I waited for it to cool.

So, I sat in the driver's seat with my feet hanging out of the open door and doodled on a notepad in my lap. It wasn't more than a couple of minutes before a car came whizzing by, kicking up a whirlwind of loose leaves on the road. The speed limit on this road was thirty. Its speed alone was enough to catch my attention for a moment.

I craned my neck to see what idiot would go that fast through this stretch of road, and I was not at all surprised by the blue Camaro whose tail lights were quickly disappearing. My head shook slowly in annoyed disapproval as I sighed back into my doodling.

Either the car would cool down or my dad would come to tow me home—whichever happened first, I would still be there, drawing. The silence only gave me time to think and that was the last thing I needed. Thinking only got me in trouble. There was so much to dwell on, so many wounds to keep open—I hated it. But I couldn't help it.

Taking a deep breath, I turned my wrist to check the time. It was four o'clock. The sound of another car, slower this time, caused me to perk up. And then I saw the car. It was Steve's. I quickly shrunk back into the driver's seat and pretended to not have seen him. Although, there was no way *he* couldn't see *me*.

Sure enough, he pulled up along the road, stopped to see me through

the open passenger side window. Nancy was in the passenger seat, but Steve leaned across her to talk into the opening. "Hey, what the hell happened?" he questioned, confused.

Sighing heavily, I closed my notepad and sat up in the seat. "Radiator quit," I answered, simply. "I'm letting it cool down. She should be fine."

"No, no—bullshit. Get in the car," Steve shook his head, pushing open the driver's side door.

I stood up from my seat, "It's fine, really. I'm waiting with Dorothy."

"Elizabeth," Steve eyed me with a serious expression from over the top of his car. "Get your little ass in the car. Right now. Come on."

There wasn't a good enough reason to leave Dorothy for me not to feel unsettled. But I felt pressured to get in the car—from Steve, from the idea that it just might be faster—so I did. I climbed into the back seat with my bag. Steve slid into his seat, pulling his door shut behind him. "I could've waited," I said, protesting quietly in the back.

"Yeah, and be standing out in the cold for hours because she doesn't start. She's not starting, Betsy. I'll drop you home and you can see if the new part got in, and then you can fix it. Okay?" Steve told me, with sporadic glances in the rear view mirror as we began to drive away.

Crossing my arms, I sunk into my seat. He was most likely right. But I didn't want to believe that Dorothy couldn't be started. Maybe if I'd had more time- maybe if- maybe. Underneath it all I was genuinely thankful for Steve's help. Nancy was quiet for a moment before asking me about our test on Monday, wondering how I was studying for it.

In all honesty, I hadn't studied for it much at all. I was too busy trying to keep myself and my car from falling apart. We talked about school and suggested studying together sometime—though I highly doubted it would actually happen, I was thankful for the distraction. Then we arrived at my house.

I climbed out from the back seat, muttering, "Thanks for the ride," just loud enough for Steve to hear. His sigh was much louder than my words.

"Hey, Betsy, hold on," he said, as I finally made it out of the car. I turned to look inside the cab, and he continued, "I'm just trying to help, okay?"

It wasn't hard to see he felt guilty for verbally man-handling me. Steve of all people knew how much that car means to me. Nodding, I replied, "I know. Thanks." He didn't say anything after that and, after a quick goodbye from Nancy, I walked up the driveway to my house.

My dad was coming onto the porch just as I reached the bottom of the steps. "I just got off the phone with Mrs. Wheeler," he told me, while I climbed the stairs. "Mike said Dorothy broke down on the way home today?"

"Yeah, the radiator gave out. She can't drive home."

"We can go get her with the truck right now if you're up for it."

I'd just made it onto the porch. "Sounds good," I nodded quickly. "She's not too far from here. But- did the new radiator come today?"

Dad loosed an exhale and I knew right then that it hadn't. But I waited for him to answer, hoping that maybe—just maybe—it came after all. "I'm sorry sweetheart, it didn't," he answered, sadly. With those words, my shoulders dropped along with my heart.

Without the part, Dorothy would remain in the garage, and stay there until the part came and I could find the time to put it in—again. Even after all the time I spent on her in there already. It was a disappointment, but I kept my chin up as best I could while dad got the keys to the truck.

When we moved to Hawknins, dad opened an auto body shop. Given it's such a small town most of our money comes from oil changes and towing. But the garage was a perfect opportunity for me to keep learning about cars—mostly so I could fix my own. It would be way too expensive to take her somewhere else when I could just do it

myself.

Dorothy was still on the side of the road where I left her, and we towed her back to the garage. The garage being below our house. It was just after six o'clock when we got her in. Dad went in the house for dinner, but I decided to stay in the garage to make sure the radiator was actually blown and not just a little worn out.

It was in fact blown. I took it out completely and set it aside for scrap. There was no point keeping it around. "I'm sorry," I told Dorothy, as I pulled it out. "I know I promised the new one would be here, but some asshole decided I didn't need my package today."

Talking to a car sounds ridiculous. But sometimes she's the only one willing to listen. I don't know which statement was worse. They were conflicting in my head—I knew I shouldn't be talking to a car even though I really needed someone to talk to right then. My problems needed to be released, so I decided to keep talking.

"Well, at least now you can't leave me, too, huh?" the words came out through a small chuckle but, as I stood there braced against the front of the car on my palms, I felt something else trying to come through. "What am I saying? It's gonna happen. It always happens. Get over it."

"Elizabeth?"

My head shot up at the mention of my name, and I turned my head to see my father at the door to the garage. Quickly, I swiped at my cheek with the back of my wrist and sniffled it all back. "Yeah, dad?" I asked, stepping out from behind the car.

"Um...Steve's on the phone for you. He says it's important."

With the way he looked at me, the way he hesitated, I knew he'd noticed. Maybe even heard what I'd said. But I acted like I didn't know at all. I nodded once, "Okay, thanks," and closed Dorothy's hood. Dad stood by the door until I came over to leave, and then he walked behind me into the house.

Yeah, he most likely heard every word. I felt guilty—not for saying them, but for burdening him with them. He had enough to deal with

without adding my problems. Exhaling, I went to the kitchen to find the phone laying on the counter by the base.

"Hey," I said, putting the phone to my ear. "What do you want?"

"Well, I figured since you won't be busy in the garage all night, you have no excuse but to let me take you to the party," Steve replied. He was nonchalant in tone, but I could tell he was smiling like a dork on the other end.

I rolled my eyes, "I don't have anything to wear."

"Just wear what you wear to school—you'll be fine. I'm picking you up in fifteen minutes."

"Wha- Steve—"

The line was dead. Growling in frustration, I forcefully placed the phone back onto the base and stepped into the living room. Dad sat on the couch, papers spread over the coffee table, focusing hard on it. "Hey, dad?" I gently interrupted.

"Hm?" he didn't look away from the table.

"Steve wants me to hang out tonight. Is that okay?"

"Of course, it's Halloween. Just be back at a reasonable hour, alright?"

"Thanks, dad."

I hurried to my bedroom. It was across the hall from dad's, just down the hall from the kitchen. Our house was nothing fancy. The carpet needed replaced, none of the furniture matched, and our dishes were plastic. But we made the best of what we had.

My room wasn't much better than the rest of the house, but I'd spent some money every now and then to spruce it up. I repainted and bought a new quilt from a thrift store. Every week I picked some new flowers and put them in a vase on my nightstand.

It was as home as this place could get. The only thing I didn't

upgrade was my closet. More specifically, the clothes in them. Steve said to wear what I wear to school. Even as unpopular as I am, I knew that was bullshit. But I didn't have anything else.

So, I wore my jeans and a red sweater I got for Christmas last year. The only jacket I had was the denim one I wore everywhere. By the time I finished dressing, a car horn echoed into the house, and I knew Steve had arrived. "Elizabeth? Steve's here!" dad called from the living room.

"I got it!" I hollered back, as I hurried from my room.

"Have fun, sweetheart," dad said, as I reached the front of the house. Finally, he was looking up from the table. "Remember—a *respectable* hour. It's a holiday but you still have schoolwork."

I nodded, "I know, dad. Bye." Then I slipped out the door.

2. Shout At The Devil

Tina's driveway was filled with cars, just as her house was filled with crazed high school students. I took a moment to straighten my sweater—though it was pitiful anyway you looked at it. "You look fine, Betsy," Nancy assured me, shutting the car door.

"I'm *really* under dressed," I disagreed, shaking my head.

Steve walked around the front of the car to meet us. "Ladies first," he gestured with a hand toward the house. "Well, one lady."

"Lead the way, Risky," I countered, giving his shoulder a shove.

He only laughed, shaking his head as he started for the house. The music could be heard booming clear out in the driveway. I liked Mötley Crüe as much as the next guy, but I was worried we'd all be going home with hearing loss. Steve and Nancy went in first and I followed closely behind into the crowded mess. "Try to have some fun, alright?" Steve shouted to be heard over the music, turning around to see me. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"You're the worst role model," I shouted in response.

He nodded, lips pulled tight, "I know."

I refrained from rolling my eyes and started wading through the crowd to get to the kitchen. If I was going to get through this, it would be because of alcohol. It wasn't anything new to me. I used to do it a lot with my old friends in Denver. Except, it was never at a place like this.

Still, I needed to relax. I wanted to enjoy this—or at least be able to pretend I was—for Steve's sake. When I made it to the kitchen, there were a few people filling their cups from a punch bowl on the island counter. Communal punch bowls were not my favorite thing, so I went to the opposite counter and found a few unopened beer cans.

That would definitely be better than the punch. I hoisted myself up on a clean section of counter by the sink in the corner and opened

one of the cans. From there, I could see over the ocean of flailing teenagers dancing and making fools of themselves.

I spotted Steve and Nancy talking to some people on the far left side of the room. For a moment, I briefly wondered if my dad would've let me out of the house if he knew this was where I was going. He most likely would've locked me in my room to keep me from going out. Then again, dad always said he was a reckless kid.

Was this what he meant? Going to parties, underage drinking and smoking? Maybe. Though, I couldn't see my dad being one of those people. He was always so serious. Then again people did tend to change as they got older. Maybe he just grew up? I didn't know.

Beer wasn't my favorite drink, but I gulp down most of the first can when I first got up on the counter. *Shout At The Devil* started playing and I opened a second can. It was an ironic song choice when you thought about the holiday.

A faint chanting filled my ears seconds before Billy entered the house from the backyard with a cigarette in his mouth. He made his rounds before making his way over to Steve, where he was joined by a few other guys. It was then that Nancy turned and left for the kitchen. "Do you know what's in the punch?" she asked me, stepping around the island.

I swallowed down another mouthful of beer and shook my head. Some guy in a toga downed his cup of punch and yelled, "Pure fuel! PURE FUEL!" Nancy and I were both stunned by his ferocity. He tossed his empty cup and dove back into the crowd.

Nancy went straight for the punch bowl and I cringed as she scooped herself a cup. Steve entered the kitchen as Nancy started to drink it. "Hey, hey- whoa, Nance, Nance," he tried to stop her. "Take it easy."

She lowered her cup and eyed him bitterly, "What? Just being stupid teenagers for the night. Wasn't that the deal?"

Nancy swallowed the rest of her drink, tossed the cup, and went back into the living room. Steve sighed and leaned into the counter, hanging his head. "What was that about?" I questioned from the

corner, a bit confused.

He shook his head as he pushed off the island. "Nothing, nothing," he turned to face me, and suddenly his eyes rounded. "Hey, hey—what are you doing? Where did you get that?"

I took another drink from the can in my hand and pointed to the counter, the spot where several others remained unopened. "It's a party. You *drink* at parties," I shrugged, after swallowing.

He grumbled something under his breath in frustration and left the kitchen. Something was obviously going on between him and Nancy that I wasn't made aware of before being forced to participate in this 'fun' outing. I doubted I would actually find out what it was until it blew up.

After Steve left, I finished the second can. The music was starting to wear on my nerves but the alcohol was starting to hit me. Annoyance would soon dissipate and maybe I could start enjoying myself. Maybe. I opened another can and took a long drink.

"Gotta say, I didn't expect to see *you* here."

A male voice startled me, pulling me away from the beer can. When it was no longer in my face, I could see who had spoken—and I wish I hadn't. It was Billy. Still puffing a cigarette, his bare chest covered in sweat and beer, and he braced a palm against the counter on the other side of the sink.

Holding my can a little tighter, I swallowed. "I knew *you'd* be here," I replied, almost stoically. My response didn't seem to bother him. If anything, it looked like it only spurred him on. Encouraging him to keep annoying me.

He pulled the cigarette from his mouth and blew out the smoke, before smirking up at me, "I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm 'asshole'."

The borderline charming way he said it was almost enough to force me to laugh—*almost*. Instead, I stifled it with another long drink from my can, rolling my eyes so far back into my skull they ran the danger

of getting stuck. "Must be a real drag. You know, moving all the way from California," I slammed the empty can on the counter beside me. "Were you this much of a dick on the West coast, too?"

"How'd you know that?"

"No one will shut up about you," I said it like it obvious—because it probably was. He only smiled, taking another pull from his cigarette as he looked back at the living room. "So...what is it?"

"What is what?" he questioned, uninterested.

I sighed, reaching for another can, "What's so special about you?"

Billy turned his attention back to me as he blew more smoke. Before answering, he took steps forward and leaned his lower back into the curve of the counter, a few inches to my right. I opened the can in my hands as he looked up at me. "Why don't *you* tell *me*?" he suggested, leaning a folded arm on the counter between us.

"I have yet to find anything," I replied, and then took a drink.

There was only a second's pause before I heard him laugh. It sounded genuine, but I didn't know him well enough to say so for sure. "Damn, you don't hold your punches, do you?" he commented, with a wide smiling-smirk. "Looks like you can handle your alcohol, too."

Sighing heavily, I held my can over my lap and looked to the crowd. Steve and Nancy had to be there somewhere. I was hoping to signal one of them for help. But then I saw them dancing together in the swarm of teens, and they looked like they were really enjoying themselves.

I didn't want them to stop having fun just because I couldn't handle myself. I could handle myself just fine. "I don't do parties," I said, without looking directly at him. He reeked of cigarettes, alcohol, and bad decisions—but he was still *really* pretty. Any indication that I thought that would only make it harder to get him to go away. So I kept my expression as slack as possible and averted my eyes just the same.

The beer wasn't doing what I wanted it to. I was a little numb, but

nothing too noticeable. I'd hoped to feel a little more relaxed by now. Yet all I wanted to do was hide in my bed and cry alone. Finally, I put the beer can on the counter to my left and turned to Billy. "Do you mind...?" I asked, pointing loosely to the cigarette in his hand.

"You smoke?" he questioned, skeptical.

"Jesus, keep it in your pants. Cough it up."

I held out my hand in a gesture, and he handed over the cigarette. When was the last time I smoked, you ask? Over a year ago. Before I moved to Hawkins. Moving here was supposed to change a lot about me. Make things better. Except everything stayed the same. So, why shouldn't I? I took a pull from the cigarette and handed it back, breathing out the nicotine.

The stereo was now playing AC/DC and I prepared my nerves for the screaming about to ensue. "Betsy," Steve suddenly stepped into the kitchen from the left, pulling my eyes that way. "What the *hell* are you doing?"

He looked confused but, most of all, deeply concerned. I opened my mouth to answer honestly when Billy decided he had a better answer and spoke up first. "She's enjoying herself, Harrington. Screw off," Billy glared, propping himself up to see around me.

"Stay out of this, man," Steve shook his head, glaring back at Billy.

"Oh my god, will both of you just leave me alone, please?" I interjected, frustrated with both of them now. It was then that Nancy hurried to the kitchen to get more punch. Steve quickly dove to the punch bowl and tried to stop her from drinking out of the cup she filled.

They fought over it like a pair of children. Until the cup lurched toward Nancy, and red liquid dowsed the front of her white sweater. My mouth fell open as the crowd shared a collective gasp. Steve tried to apologise, but Nancy marched off—presumably to get cleaned up—and he followed after her like a dog on a leash. "What a goddamn mess," Billy commented, under his breath, before taking another pull from the cigarette.

"I- I should go make sure everything's okay."

I quickly put my beer can on the counter and pushed off until my feet touched the floor. It was a good excuse to finally rid myself of him. That, and I actually cared about what was going on with Steve and Nancy. They were the only ones that seemed to genuinely care about me at this school. In this whole town.

"Stay spicy, Bets," Billy said, as I attempted to leave the kitchen.

It almost caused me to stop completely. No one—*no one*—in my life has ever called me 'Bets'. Probably because they weren't psychopaths. Instead of stopping and putting the bastard in his place where he belonged, I settled for a disgruntled look over my shoulder. All he did was smirk.

For the first time since he came to town, I had to tell myself not to be like Alice and Trinity. I had to force myself to look for Steve and Nancy despite the tiny voice in the back of my mind, causing me to wonder what would happen if I stayed in the kitchen. I told myself I didn't need to know. That I didn't *want* to know.

I followed the direction in which they disappeared. But I felt a little dizzy, like the room was moving just enough to be noticeable, and it was throwing my sense of direction all off. Maybe the alcohol was doing more than I realized?

Still, I kept going, down a hallway out the backside of the kitchen. I was halfway down the hall when a door flung open suddenly, nearly hitting me in the face. "Whoa- *shit*!" I jolted back to miss it. Steve shut the door pretty hard, and he only sighed when he saw me.

"What, did you get enough of the good stuff?" he asked, spitefully.

My head recoiled on my shoulders, "It was just a *cigarette*, Steve."

"Yeah, that's how it *starts*, Betsy!" he raised his voice a little. "For God's sake—I'm going home. You and Nancy have fun, alright?"

He walked past me, brushed hard against my shoulder. I was confused by his sudden turn in attitude but that didn't worry me as much as what he said. "You're going to leave me here?" I questioned,

turning around. He kept walking, so I started walking, too, "Steve! Stop! Wait!"

Steve was on a mission to find the front door. Either he couldn't hear me calling after him, or he just didn't care. Desperately, I kept calling, and I followed him through the crowd out to the driveway. "Steve! What the hell is going on?" I shouted, standing a few feet from the door. "Talk to me!"

"Ask Nancy!" he hollered, continuing on to his car.

I watched as he slid in behind the wheel of his car and drove away, all the while not once looking back at me. Whatever happened with Nancy must've been big. That, or it's just really easy to hate me. Maybe it's a mixture of both? Regardless, I felt something hit me deep inside my chest. I could feel that lump forming in my throat again.

My feet carried me into the house and straight to the kitchen—but I wasn't paying attention to who noticed. Or who cared. I simply marched in, took another beer from the counter, and found my way out to the backyard. Everyone outside had either left or gone inside, so it was now fairly quiet. The only noise now came from inside.

I sat on the ground in a clean spot free from all the trash of the party, and opened the can as I crossed my legs in front of me. What was it I said earlier? *I can handle myself just fine*. Theoretically, yes. Realistically, no. Because, from the second I sat down, I was trying my hardest not to lose it.

When the party died down, I could call my dad. I could call him and he would come get me. Maybe Nancy would be around then, but I didn't even know where she was. I didn't know if I had the willpower to go back inside and look, either. I sat there on the grass, drank, and listened to the music booming through the open back door.

Nothing could be more miserable, could it? Being at someone's house with no way home, all alone at a party, trying not to cry while you drink so you'll forget it all. Two or three small tears slipped out, but I was quick to wipe them off my cheeks.

If felt like I'd been sitting there for a long time before anyone

bothered me. I saw the movement in my peripheral and the chatter from whoever had just come outside to their friends inside, and then I looked up. Billy wasn't even looking as he walked a few feet from the door, lighting a new cigarette. I stayed quiet in the hopes he wouldn't even see me.

That hope was, unfortunately, in vain. He blew out the smoke from the cigarette, shoving one hand in his pocket, "See something you like?"

Instinctively, I rolled my eyes, before settling them on the half empty can in my hand. "Yeah. It's about as tall as my hand. Metal. Usually filled with liquid," I described the beer, seeming uninterested.

"You're a real smart ass, you know that?"

"I've heard."

He took a half step to face me, blowing more smoke. "Thought you went home with Steve," he said, purposely pronouncing Steve's name weirdly. "What are you still doing here?"

"Steve ditched me, so...I'm just gonna wait and call my dad," I answered, before taking a drink from my can.

"You don't say."

Nothing about what he said was as upbeat as that phrase is usually used. I glanced up to see he was looking out at the yard, both hands on his hips beneath the folds of his jacket, with the cigarette hanging from his lips. But his jaw was tight to match his displeased demeanor.

Why he would care if I got ditched was beyond me, though it looked like he did. I shook my head and turned back to the can. He had no right to care. No right at all. It only frustrated me, and I questioned why I said anything at all.

After a short moment, Billy pulled the cigarette from his mouth and let his arms fall to his sides. "Alright, this is too goddamn pathetic. I'm taking you home," he announced, with a huffy exhale. I stared up at him with narrowed eyes and raised brows.

"Excuse me?" I questioned, surprised and slightly annoyed.

"Get off your ass—I'm taking you home."

"I'm not getting in a car with you—you're *drunk*."

"*Please*. You're more drunk than I am," he pointed out, gesturing at me with his cigarette. "I saw you stumbling around earlier. Do you wanna sit here and bitch or do you wanna go home?"

I could still call my dad. That was still an option. But I didn't want to wait—I just wanted to go home. "You're such an asshole," I grumbled, getting up off the grass.

"Car's this way, sunshine," he gestured to the back door before starting through it, putting the cigarette back between his lips.

Begrudgingly, I followed him inside. It amazed me how much people were still raging, like the party had just started, and it wasn't going to end anytime soon. Keeping track of Billy in the crowd was easy. All I had to do was look for the mullet in leather.

As I passed by the kitchen, I left my can there. There was no way I was going to keep drinking. If I was going home, I would be talking to my dad, and he would know something was up. He, like Steve, would probably give me a long talking to about bad habits.

Though, I didn't really need it. I wasn't relapsing. This was one night. One really, really bad night that I want to sleep away as soon as possible. I was still a bit lightheaded, dizzy—a little more now that I'd had more to drink since the last time I was walking around.

But I followed Billy outside and got into the passenger seat of his car. He sat in the driver's seat and took one last pull from the cigarette before tossing it, then started the engine. All I could think about was how I wished Dorothy sounded like that when she started up. She hadn't sounded so good starting for a long time.

Mostly because she was old, but also because I didn't have the money to take care of her like I should've. I was sure to put my seatbelt on—I knew I was going to need it, if his driving tonight was anything like this afternoon. Though, we pulled out of the driveway at a somewhat

reasonable speed.

"Where ya from, Betsy?" he asked, head tipped back against his seat, one hand on the steering wheel. "Can't be this shithole—not with an attitude like *that*."

Loosely crossing my arms, I leaned into my door, eyeing the passing trees through the window. "Denver," I answered, giving the bare minimum necessary to shut him up.

"Denver? Well, you're just full of surprises."

"Why are you even here?"

"Dumbass parents."

"Can't relate."

"Yeah...you seem like a real daddy's girl," he commented, patronizingly sarcastic. There was something subtly bitter in those words, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. It just hung there in the space between us silently.

I couldn't help my curious mind and its theories as I navigated the way to my house. But I stayed as quiet as I could manage. If I didn't need to talk, I didn't—I was avoiding further conversation at all cost. Though, the ride to my house wasn't very long at all.

We pulled up in front of my driveway, as I directed, and Billy put it in park. "This is your *house*?" he questioned, eyebrows knitted as he looked out the passenger window.

"Yeah...?" I nodded slowly, slightly annoyed by his reaction. "Thanks for the ride, asshole."

"Sure thing, Bets."

My head tilted, expression conveying my disgust with the ridiculous name, but it only caused him to make that stupid smile-smirk of his. "Don't call me that," I told him, seriously.

"Or what?" he playfully taunted.

Goddamn him. Exhaling heavily, I reached for the door handle. Forcing myself out was my only escape. If I didn't, I might not ever leave. Not with all this alcohol in my bloodstream. Still, the corners of my mouth were trying to curve up, curve up with the heat coming to my cheeks.

Something about that smile was magnetic in the worst way possible. "What are you gonna do, Bets?" he prompted, trying to push me into answering. But I didn't. I started to open my door, rolling my eyes for the millionth time tonight.

The millionth time this *week*. I turned to the door as I pushed it open a couple of inches when suddenly, it snapped back shut. Movement in my peripheral caused me to turn my head to the left, only to be met by Billy's hand on the door and his face incredibly close, causing my body to shrink into my chair instinctively.

But that was the biggest problem with this new scenario—nothing in my body wanted to back away. Within seconds my heart had climbed into my throat, simultaneously racing too fast for comfort. The odd lighting cast shadows on his face, but the blue of his eyes was too bright to dim. I couldn't look away from them.

There was a second of silence before he leaned forward, lips so close to my ear they almost touched, and whispered, "Tell me." The involuntary shiver that ran through my body was almost embarrassing.

"You're crazy," I managed to mumble, squeezing my eyes shut as he pulled away from my ear. "And drunk. And this is *really* stupid."

I felt something brush my nose, then the unmistakable feeling of lips on mine. I'd been kissed before—it wasn't like I wouldn't know how to tell. But it caught me by surprise and, for a second, it didn't truly register what just happened.

Even when I did, it was still all a confusing haze. There was no weight to the realization because I couldn't think—all the beer I drank made sure of that. I cursed myself for going to that stupid party. And Steve Harrington would feel my wrath the second I get to school tomorrow. That is, if he has the nerve to show up.

There was something about the thought of Steve knowing about this and being pissed off that made me want to take my time. Kiss him back out of spite for someone that wasn't even there. So, I did. What the hell did I have to lose, anyway? I grabbed Billy's face with my hands and opened my mouth to kiss him back, sliding my tongue past his lips the second they opened.

Billy went along with it, taking my lead just fine—feeding into my spiteful desires. All I could taste was alcohol and cigarettes but I didn't stop. The flavor was addictive. Our tongues fought for dominance as his hand moved from the door to my leg and squeezed, his thumb pressing into the inside of my thigh. His lips suddenly slipped from mine, landing on the right side of my neck. It was instinctual to lean back, tipping my head, granting better access to the skin.

Even drunk, I knew I would regret this. But that didn't stop me from biting my lip to silence an involuntary moan. Some of it slipped out, my fingers lost in his blonde curls, and I could've sworn I heard a throaty growl over the pounding heartbeat in my ears. His lips danced over my skin, up the side of my neck to a spot behind my ear.

A sudden tapping rang sharp in my right ear, causing my body to jolt hard enough to pull us apart. It startled Billy as well—causing him to lurch back several inches. Both of us looked to the window behind me for answers, only to find the torso of a man I knew belonged to my father. I could recognise his terrible fashion anywhere, no matter how intoxicated I was.

"Shit," I hissed, under my breath. Almost immediately, I pushed open my door with shaking hands and climbed out onto the sidewalk. The sudden change in position—sitting and then standing—caused my vision to double for a second, but I didn't let on. Dad looked concerned, angry, and confused all at the same time.

He grabbed the door and forced it shut, a bit harder than necessary. It wasn't hard to tell that he knew what I'd been up to, both in the car and at the party. Billy drove away from the driveway the second the door was closed. Though, I couldn't say I was surprised by the quick exit. "Go to your room, Elizabeth," dad told me, calm but stern.

Embarrassed, I nodded quickly, and tried to walk as normally as possible to the front steps. I didn't know if he was behind me, but it didn't matter—he was watching anyway. There were a few awkward, almost stumbling moments, though I made it up the stairs without falling on my ass. That was a feat in and of itself.

It was futile trying to convince him of my sobriety and yet I still fought to maintain that lie. We'd spent too long discussing how our fresh start wouldn't involve addictive substances for even my drunk self to tell the truth. I went to my room as told, turning the lock before throwing myself on top of my bed.

But that was me, wasn't it? Doing as told, holding obedience above everything else? Now more than ever, that was me. Drunk me hated it. I was too tired, too drunk, to want to change before drifting off. So, in a frustrated huff, I rolled over onto my stomach, and I held onto my pillow—begging, pleading with it to give me some kind of comfort. Some kind of reassurance that this night wouldn't ruin everything I'd worked so hard for. It couldn't—could it?

3. Watch Grease And Cry

Morning came with a harsh headache and a reality check. Last night was more than it should have been, that was one thing I knew for certain. I pulled myself out of bed with enough time to shower before heading out to school—something my dad would have to help me with. There was no way I would have time to walk. Not today.

My head was a little fuzzy, and I was off balance getting in and out of the shower. If anything, it was simply a bad idea to drink that hard after so long of not drinking at all. It made the hangover so much harder to deal with. Though, I took some of dad's ibuprofen from the medicine cabinet for my headache. Then, I dried off.

Toweling off my shoulders, something caught my eye, causing me to stop completely. I squinted and leaned closer to the mirror, only for my eyes to spring wide and narrow again—first shock, then annoyance and frustration. I reached my hand up and vigorously scrubbed the faint discoloration on the side of my neck but the mark didn't change.

"*Dammit*, Billy," I whispered the hiss, trying to keep the sound within the bathroom walls. The last thing I needed was for my father to find out about this. There was enough damage simply in interacting with a guy like Billy at all. But this? This could destroy it. It, being our relationship. Getting me out of Denver was probably the only reason we still had one.

Now, in Hawkins, I was doing exactly what got me into that mess—the mess my gullibility caused. For the sake of normalcy and sanity, I ran to my room and found a sweater with a high enough neckline to cover the mark on my neck. Then I dressed in a fury. I was going to be late either way at this point.

As soon as I was dressed I hurried out to the living room. Dad was in the kitchen, leaning back into the counter, drinking from a mug. "Good morning," he said, as I entered the room. "Steve's waiting for you."

My feet stopped and my eyebrows knitted in confusion, "What?"

Where?"

"The driveway. He's been parked out there for twenty minutes."

"Okay, thanks. I gotta go. Love you," I sighed, and started for the door.

"We're talking later," Dad said, his voice stopping me at the door. I looked over my shoulder at him, only to see his expression matched the serious tone to his voice. "When you get home."

I only nodded before slipping outside. Knowing it would happen beforehand didn't stop the anxious nerves knotting in my stomach from hearing it. Sure enough, Steve's car was at the end of the driveway. He sat in the driver's seat looking off somewhere else as I approached from the house. My knuckles knocked on the window, and then I pulled the door open.

Steve lurched upright in his seat, eyes snapping toward me, as I sat in the passenger seat and shut my door. "Hey, what the hell? We've got, like, five minutes to get to school," he admonished me, as though this was planned ahead of time and I was making him late.

"What the hell? What the *hell*, Steve," I argued, as he started the car. "You left me last night—I had to ride home with *Billy*—"

Steve paused, glancing at me quickly as we pulled away from the curb, "Hold on- *Billy* took you home? *Billy* took you home?"

"Yes! Because *you* were an asshole and *left* me!"

He sighed heavily before groaning, scrubbing the side of his face with his hand, the other hand still on the wheel. We had to drive fast to make it to school in time—and Steve wasn't shying away from the challenge. The trees and houses were nothing but a blur as I glared out my window.

Silence was to be expected. I knew Steve wasn't good at this kind of thing—but we needed to talk about it. Otherwise, we'd grow apart. And I didn't want to lose my only friend. "I'm sorry, okay? It was stupid," Steve finally spoke, a bit quietly.

"Why'd you leave?" I questioned, looking in his direction again.

"Eh...Nancy and I broke up. I think."

My eyes shot wide, "What?! Why?!"

"She said she doesn't love me—that we're just 'bullshit'." Though his expression didn't change much, the hurt was visible in his eyes. My shoulders sagged as I leaned back in my seat with an exhale.

Shaking my head slowly, I said, "So that's it. She drunkenly says she doesn't love you and suddenly everything you've ever felt for her goes out the window?"

"I don't know, okay? It just...it's made me think about a lot of things."

"You're so dumb."

"Well, what did *you* do? I mean, after I left."

"I had another beer and cried," I answered, honestly, with lips pulled tight. My heart began to race thinking about what happened after that. Nervously, I reached up and scratched behind my right ear. "And then Billy offered to give me a ride. And...we sort of made out."

I could've sworn Steve was going to hit the brakes. The car slowed dramatically but, in a second, sped up again as he visibly thought better of it. I gripped tight to the door handle during the speed change. "Steve!" I gasped. He looked at me in quick, sporadic glances with a panicked expression only his face could make.

"Betsy, I swear to god- why the hell would you do that?! He's a walking, talking dick! You know he's just going to brag about it to his posse—you're just a trophy to him."

"You don't think I know that, Steve?!"

Sighing again, Steve briefly grimaced, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"*Fuck* you, Steven," I hissed the words, my voice still risen. I folded my arms tightly over my chest and turned my eyes to the window—but my throat was tightening and eyes about to sting. Steve groaned,

pulling into the school parking lot. Most spots were already full so he had to settle for a space near the end of the aisle.

As soon as the car was stopped, I pushed open my door. "Betsy, come on," Steve tried to keep me in the car, but I was already getting out. "You know i'm just trying to look out for you."

It was something he'd done since I first got to Hawkins High. I never asked, he just started doing it. Advising me on who to date, keeping his 'friends' from being douches when I was around, and hanging out with me when no one else would. Exhaling heavily, I replied, "Thanks for the ride—I'm late," and shut the passenger door.

I was, in fact, late. And nothing irked me more than being late to class. But I wanted to get away from Steve as fast as possible before my emotions could decide they couldn't hold off any longer. I walked quickly through the front doors of the school and made it to Mr. Dempsey's classroom. I only received slight admonishment for the tardiness—which I was thankful for.

The last thing I needed was more attention. But, when I left the classroom, that's exactly what I got. I stepped into the hallway and started for my locker. It wasn't unusual. Though, something about it caught the stares of a few girls as they passed me. I could hear them, their hushed words, genuinely believing my name wasn't obvious.

My forehead creased in confusion and my eyes shot down to my clothes. Was my outfit really worth gossiping about? It was just what I always wore—jeans and a sweater. I didn't think it was worth that kind of reaction, but it became apparent that my outfit wasn't what they were gossiping about when my eyes swept the hall.

Sporadic glances aimed at me from every direction. Hushed voices, my name in whispers floated through the air. I kept walking even though I wanted to run. What the hell was going on? I would've expected this kind of response if I'd gone to school naked or something—but not for this. When I walked up to my locker, the girls at their lockers beside mine quickly dispersed. Some rolled their eyes, others laughed.

I shook my head at the childish behavior and opened up my locker.

There wasn't much else I could do about it. If no one was going to come out and say what was going on, how would I know? I wasn't in the loop on this one. They practically couldn't shut up last time.

"Hey, uh...Betsy?"

My head turned toward the sudden male voice nearby, only to see a guy I knew was Jonathon Byers. We weren't exactly friends—but I did watch his little brother a couple times last year. "Hey...what's up?" I asked, curiously.

He exhaled nervously as he took a few steps closer, sidling up to the locker next to mine. "I know we don't really hang out or anything, but I just thought you should know," he said, lowering his voice. "There's this rumor going around. About you."

I turned to face him almost immediately, "What rumor?"

"Well, um...people are saying you and Billy Hargrove...y'know...slept together. It wouldn't have been a big deal if Tommy hadn't filled in some blanks—"

"You mean, like...details and stuff?"

Jonathon nodded sadly, and I suddenly found myself swallowing down a lump. That definitely explained a lot. Rumors had been going around about me since my first day. I was used to hearing my story perverted and twisted by people who'd never met me. But no one had done *this* yet. "I'm really sorry," Jonathon said, sympathetically.

My heart was starting to race again—this time accompanied with something sour. Something sour that threatened to turn my stomach on its head. "It's okay. Thank you for telling me," I told him. "I'll take care of it."

"If you need help with that...i'm around."

I smiled a little, "Thanks."

He gave a small nod, taking steps back from the locker, and then headed off to what I assumed was his next class. I needed to be getting to mine, as well. But I couldn't help feeling a little differently.

It felt violating. Rumors had gone around that I was promiscuous already. I should be fine, just like last time, and all the other times.

I repeated that to myself over and over as I walked to class, keeping my eyes straight ahead. My own voice filled my head to block out the subtle noise around me. It worked for most of the important parts of the school day, like during classes I needed to focus on. Then I went to my locker after first period.

The whispering and weird looks had died down a bit and they weren't quite as noticeable. But there was one look I'll never forget. In a quick glance down the hallway, I spotted Steve. He was walking this way, quickly, like he was on a mission. During the second I'd looked that way, he glanced up and caught my eye.

It would've been fine. I would've been okay. Until his lips pulled tight, his features softened, and his eyes said *i'm sorry*. Something about it was enough to ruin me. Maybe it was the overabundance of sympathy making me think about my problems or maybe it was just seeing Steve so sympathetic. Either way, I shut my locker immediately and hurried for the girl's bathroom.

I could hear him, calling for me—but I didn't stop. I couldn't. I kept going until I was safely inside, and I found an empty stall to hide in. My fingers quickly locked the door and I dropped onto the toilet seat, suddenly fighting for a deep breath. Steve was right. I was just a trophy. Billy bragged about it to his posse and that was that.

There was some part of me that knew that was going to happen, even completely plastered the night before. Though, I wasn't mentally prepared for just how much it happened. It seemed like everyone in the school was hearing about this. And although nothing happened, I was forever known as the slut that gave in.

Just another girl dropping her panties at Billy Hargrove's feet. The thought sent my hand up, clamping down over my mouth as I felt the sting of tears in my dry eyes. It made me angry—but with everything else going on in my life, it made me sad more.

The stall next to mine flushed and the door clicked open, the whining of hinges echoing in the otherwise silent room. I could hear the sink,

and I tried desperately to keep the sound down, taking in careful breaths to remain silent. But, the second the sink turned off, I heard a familiar voice.

"Hello? Is...someone there?"

It was Nancy. Her shadow moved closer to the stalls next to mine and I squeezed my eyes shut, clenching my jaw. I could hear her testing the doors, seeing which ones would open. When she got to mine, she pushed on the door and it didn't budge, causing her to take a quick step back.

"Are you okay? If you need someone to talk to...I can help," she offered, gently through the door. I was conflicted. It would be easy to open the door and let her in, to talk it out and maybe even feel better about it. But also it would be easy to share and then watch helplessly while Nancy tries to 'fix' the problem.

It was a fifty-fifty split, and I wasn't sure which side I fell onto the most. Even though it was a risk I didn't want to be alone. The anxiousness in my chest and the pain draining from my eyes made it almost impossible not to speak up then. "Yeah, um...it's me...Betsy," I weakly said, lips quivering just enough to alter my words.

"Betsy? What's wrong?" Nancy quickly asked. "Can I come in?"

Exhaling some stress, I leaned forward and unlocked the stall door. Nancy pushed open the door and, almost immediately, her features sunk. Her demeanor changed right then, and she stepped into the stall, closing the door behind her.

Nancy lowered herself to crouch in front of me, getting more on my level to make it easier to talk. "What happened, Betsy?" she asked, tentatively. I reached up and tried to dry my cheeks with the backs of my hands, sniffing hard.

"You haven't heard? It's all over school, Nance."

"What's all over school?"

It was hard to understand how she didn't know, yet the rest of the school did. But that didn't matter so much to me right then. "I'm a

slut," I told her, dropping my hands into my lap. Saying it out loud brought on another wave of water. "I...I guess, I guess everyone thinks that...that I went home with Billy to have sex with him, and Tommy made all these details up, and...everyone's talking about it."

Although still sympathetic, Nancy's expression changed in an instant. Now she looked surprised, confused, and angry all at the same time. "What the hell? No! No, this is unacceptable. You can't let them treat you like this," she shook her head.

"What am *I* supposed to do? Argue with them? It'll just make it worse."

Visibly holding back a sigh, she asked, "What about Billy? Can't you tell him this crosses a line?"

"He's not going to care, Nancy. He benefits from this—everyone thinks he fucked the unfuckable. He's not gonna give that up," I replied, with another hard snuffle. Then, under my breath I mumbled, "Tommy probably made this shit up to get back at me."

"He'll stop when I'm done with him."

I quickly shook my head, "No, Nancy, please—"

"It's okay—I'll just tell him to back off. No big deal," Nancy assured me, standing up from her crouched position. "The guy's a psycho anyway. You deserve better than this, Betsy."

It was nice of her to say, though there was a part of me that strongly disagreed. A part of me that thought maybe all of this was happening because the universe was punishing me for everything I did in Denver. Like all of it was finally catching up. "Really, Nancy, don't—" I shook my head.

There was really no point in saying anything at all—Nancy was leaving the stall before I'd even finished my sentence. I didn't know exactly what she thought she could do in this situation. And, though it was nice of her to want to help, this was only going to make things much, much worse. So I shot up from the toilet and hurried after her. My wrists swiped at my cheeks weakly as I walked quickly after

Nancy.

Somehow she'd gotten farther ahead, moving a bit faster than I was. How did she even know where she was going? I called after her, pleading with her to wait. But she didn't stop. And this was why I didn't want to let her in. I didn't mind Nancy—but she didn't know when to mind her own business sometimes, to let things go. Telling her something was going on was like signing the situation over to her.

Nancy marched her way to the gym. I was only a handful of feet behind her when she barged through the heavy metal doors, and I quickened my pace to a light jog to catch up, entering the gymnasium only a second after. "Hey!" she barked, coming to a halt at the edge of the basketball court. The team was in the middle of practice.

The coaches looked confused on the sidelines, saying things to each other, and I was worried we'd get in trouble for this. We probably would. It was just a matter of when. Everyone on the court screeched to a stop in their own time, and all heads were turning this way. I stepped up behind Nancy and tugged at her arm.

"Come on, Nance, let's just go," I pleaded quietly.

"You," Nancy continued, looking directly at Steve and Billy—but I knew who her focus was. "Yeah, you. Who the hell do you think you are? Taking advantage of a girl's reputation just to boost your ego?"

More firmly, I mustered up the strength to speak, "*Nancy*."

Her torso twisted as she turned to look back at me. There was no doubt I probably looked miserable, and I was hoping she would see that and agree to walk away. So I tilted my head in an expression and refused to budge. She clenched her jaw with a sigh in response. I could tell she was reading my expression correctly, but was reluctant to give it up.

Sharp squeaks on the floor echoed out before a male voice spoke up. "What the hell are you talking about?" I didn't have to look to know it was Billy. When my eyes did move that way, it was just in time to see Steve shove Billy's shoulder pretty hard.

"Come on, man, you know exactly what she's talking about," Steve said, visibly perturbed by Billy's response. "You told your pals you had sex with Betsy and then let them talk about her like a piece of meat."

"I don't know what's going on here, but we're in the middle of practice," Coach Randall said, looking at me and Nancy pointedly.

I nodded quickly, "I'm sorry, we're leaving. Nancy, we're *leaving*. Let's go."

My fingers gripped Nancy's coat and I pulled as I started walking toward the double doors we'd come in through. Her feet stumbled a little before she actually started walking with me. I thought it would never end. My cheeks felt hot and my heart was racing—and all I wanted to do was skip the rest of the day, go home, and cry in my own bed.

Though, I wasn't sure my dad would be very happy about that. He might just be more unhappy about what caused me to skip school. Was I being too weak? Was I letting it get to me too much? Probably, but I was too close to tell. I needed someone to snap me out of it, to force me to act normally again.

I dragged Nancy out of the gymnasium and the second we were away from the door, I let her go. "I can't believe you did that," shaking my head, I kept walking. "Why didn't you just let it go?"

"Because you're being treated like trash!" Nancy defended, walking faster to fall into step with me.

My feet stopped abruptly on a thought that crossed my mind, and I turned to face her as she stopped, too. Nancy's head recoiled in her shoulders, her eyes widening slightly, seeing my face now. "You don't get it! This is *my* problem—and you just made more messes for *me* to clean up. You're not the one who has to deal with it, Nancy," I told her, helplessly angry.

Her head slowly began to shake, "I- I'm sorry, I was just trying to help."

"Hey," a stern male voice pulled both our attentions back to the gymnasium door. It was Billy. He marched from the gym dripping in sweat, staring down me and Nancy. "We need to talk."

"She doesn't want to talk to you-" Nancy started, features contorting with annoyance as if nothing I said mattered.

Immediately, I grabbed her wrist, "You've done *enough*, Nancy. Just go, okay? Go."

My hands made a gesture toward the other end of the hall, and she took steps back from me. A voice deep inside the back of my mind was wondering if I was being too harsh. But the annoyance, frustration, and embarrassment this whole situation had put in my stomach only made me want to push her away harder.

It was time for her to get to another class, anyway. Nancy nodded once, eyes downcast, and she started down the hall away from me. There was an air of defeat about her—like she knew it was finally done. "Wanna tell me what the hell happened?" Billy said, coming to stand at my side, in my peripheral.

After a deep exhale, I turned to face him with what remaining frustration I could muster. "Why don't you tell me, Billy? How does giving me a ride home cause everyone at school to miraculously think we slept together?" I questioned, throwing my arms out at my sides.

"I never told anyone *jackshit* about us," Billy leaned in, his voice dropping in volume. "You know why everyone thinks we fucked? We left the party together last night, in front of *everyone*."

"So, *you* didn't say anything. But you also don't give a *shit* that your pal Tommy spread around some explicit details about our night together, do you, *lover*?"

My blood was boiling. The sadness only remained on my face in tear stains, now replaced with the anger I'd suppressed since I first heard about the new rumors. Billy's jaw clenched, for a second, his eyes darted away. To what, I didn't know. But they were back too soon to find out.

"I'll take *care* of it. Just keep your damn mouth shut," he said, before stepping back.

He turned around and marched back to the gymnasium, thrusting his hand into the door too hard. It flung open and slammed shut behind him. I stood there in the hall, huffing oxygen—and I tried to convince myself to stay at school for the rest of the day. Going home early would be a little too dramatic, even for me. Wouldn't it?

Rolling my eyes far back into my skull, I swiveled on my heel and headed off to my locker. If the clock was correct then I was at least fifteen minutes late to chemistry. My brain probably couldn't handle anything being thrown at me, but I could take notes and try to understand them when I got home.

I grabbed my books and tried to scrub my face—even though I knew it would be absolutely useless. My cheeks were pink and my eyes puffy, accentuating the light purple beneath them already. There was no way to fix it completely so I shuffled to class and pretended it wasn't there. I pretended I didn't cry a little too hard in the bathroom.

I pretended nothing happened in the gym. And I sure as hell pretended like I didn't know 'take care of it' meant beat someone up. Or, at the very least, strongly shake them down. When class ended for lunch, I took my things and sat alone at a picnic table outside. Well, I was alone for a few minutes—just long enough to get my sketch book out—before someone dropped onto the other bench of the table.

In briefly glancing up, I saw it was Steve. He sighed, leaning onto the table with his folded arms. "Hey. Are you okay?" he asked, jutting his chin in my direction. I quietly pulled out my pencil and gave a small shrug, not knowing really how I felt just yet.

"The urge to kick someone in the face comes and goes," I replied.

Steve nodded, "Yeah. That's understandable. Look, I'm just...really sorry. I shouldn't have left you last night and, if I hadn't, this whole thing wouldn't be messing with you—"

"It's okay, Steve," I shook my head, setting down the pencil to make

myself focus on him. "Really. It happened, this whole thing happened—can't change any of it now. I'm sorry for getting bitchy this morning, though."

"Eh, I deserved that. So, uh...you and Billy get things sorted?"

"I guess. He said he would take care of it and I needed to shut up," I answered, picking up the pencil again. There was a sketch already started so I didn't need to think much beforehand—I could simply let my body de-stress by working from muscle memory. "Was he dropped on the head as a baby or did I miss something?"

Steve made a *pfft* and readjusted his position, leaning into the side of the table with both feet up on the bench, "Hell if I know. The guy's a psycho."

"Have you talked to Nancy?"

"Yeah...she didn't remember what she said, of course—"

"Of course."

"—so I jogged her memory. She said she was just drunk but she couldn't tell me she loved me, so I'm pretty sure that means she doesn't. We're done."

I looked up from the sketch to give Steve a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry," I told him, quietly. "Do you wanna come over tonight? We can watch *Grease* and cry together."

Steve laughed a little at the idea, and a smile was starting to form on his lips. It seemed like whenever nothing could work out for either of us, we always ended up together—being each other's only real friend. That's how our friendship started.

He nodded, "I just might."

"Well, I'll probably be in the garage so feel free to let yourself in."

"Oh, yeah. Did the radiator ever come in?" Steve asked, tilting his head with the question.

"I'm not sure—I'll find out when I get home," I shrugged again, before turning back to my paper and pencil. Steve and I sat together for the remainder of our lunch period, keeping the topic of conversation as normal as possible.

It helped me relax enough to keep my composure throughout the rest of the school day. There were a few whispers and some terribly hidden glances but, for the most part, it had stopped. Or I'd stopped being able to notice it. Either way, I was thankful. Tomorrow might be a different story, though I was sure I'd be more apt to handle it then as opposed to today.

Today, I woke up late and hungover. Tomorrow, I will wake up like any other day. Already there was so much less stress involved. I got my things from my locker and headed out for the day. Steve offered at lunch to drive me home, but I decided to walk. There was no ulterior motive—I simply needed some fresh air. He wasn't too supportive of it but didn't argue with me this time.

I would walk everywhere when Dorothy was out of service, anyway. It was always nice to smell the air, crunch the leaves, say hi to random neighbors who happened to be watering their flowerbeds. Though, the air was a little colder this afternoon. I tucked my fingers inside my sweater and then stuffed my hands into my pockets.

Wearing a higher neckline was a good idea regardless of the mark on my neck, what with this cold breeze. Autumn was my favorite season but I preferred to admire it through a window, maybe beside a fireplace with some cocoa. I'd passed the spot where Dorothy broke down when I decided to take out my camera.

The camera was nothing fancy—just a beat up Polaroid my aunt Donna gave me. That was a nice Christmas. All of us could get together and enjoy what would be the last holiday with my mother. I didn't remember a whole lot of it, thanks to no one other than myself. Dad hadn't gotten me off that poison yet so the day was spent high.

Adam was still the love of my life, and his stupid dog chewed up my slipper Christmas morning. Everyone thought it was so hilarious until I snuck away one slipper from each suitcase. Things were crazy and hectic but I was happy. We were all happy. Then, the following

Spring, mom passed—and none of the happy days mattered anymore.

There was a bittersweet nostalgia in thinking back, but also a deep sadness. I took pictures of the orange and brown leaves—just a couple to save away. Maybe they would end up in my scrapbook? I tried not to think of my mother too much while I walked. Today was hard enough without falling down that rabbit hole.

My ears didn't catch the faint hum of a vehicle until it zipped by on the road, thrusting all the leaves up into the air in violently chaotic swirls. As the leaves floated back down, the vehicle's brake lights lit up red, and only then did I pay attention to the car. "What the hell?" I half-groaned, stopping as I watched the car do the same ahead.

It was a blue Camaro—the last car I needed to see. The car remained parked along the side of the road ahead, unmoving, and I begrudgingly resumed my pace toward the vehicle. I'd hoped it would be someone else's Camaro and they were going to drive off the second I got close. But the car stayed right where it was at even as I reached the passenger side door.

"Are you stalking me now?" I asked, leaning down to look into the open window.

Billy's features were slacked, seemingly uninterested in every possible way as he glanced in my direction. "Why the hell are you walking?" he questioned. "I thought King Steve was driving you home."

"Not that it's your business, but I wanted to walk. Aren't you missing your passenger? Your step-sister? Or, did you get rid of the body already?"

"The little brat didn't show up. Not that it's your business."

The inexpressive lines of his face remained the same but, somehow, I knew he was sassing me. Like there was just an understanding that it was happening. I found myself standing upright, rolling my eyes with a heavy exhale. "Are you getting in or what?" Billy asked, rhetorically.

"You really think I'm doing that again?" I countered, refusing to look

through the window again.

"Christ, you're less of a pussy when you're drunk."

Instinctively, I groaned, "I need to go to the store."

"I don't care. Get in the car."

With no one around to see this, there was no chance of another rumor starting. But getting dressed this morning came to mind and I remembered what else happened last night—a tiny half-truth to that incredibly big lie. I didn't want to kiss him again.

So, if I got in, I would need to stay as far on my side as possible and be prepared to roll out of the car at a moment's notice. It sounded doable. Sighing heavily, I pulled open the passenger door and slid onto the seat. We were moving the second the door was closed.

4. Through His Stomach

Dad's car was absent from the lot when we pulled into my driveway, and it confused me. Usually there was no reason why dad *wouldn't* be home when I got back from school. Sometimes, it seemed like he made a point of being there just to welcome me back. To make sure I came home at all. It was something I didn't realize I appreciated until I walked through the door and no one said hello.

It made the house feel just a little too empty. I sighed heavily as I let the door swing open behind me, carrying a grocery bag to the kitchen. "I could've taken both bags," I mumbled, glancing over my shoulder before entering the next room.

Billy was behind me, shuffling in with the other grocery bag. He huffed a chuckle, "Jesus. You'd think you lived in a nun house."

"Usually, the only male allowed in here is Steve. For good reason."

I put the bag down on the counter and began plucking out its contents, sorting them into small groups, making it easier to work step-by-step later. The door made a thud as it shut seconds before Billy stepped into the kitchen. He set the second bag next to the one I was dissecting and then wandered into the living room.

Knowing he just came inside to snoop didn't bother me. Knowing he could be here when my dad got back was a little different. He would recognize Billy's car in an instant and probably kick him out—with force, if needed. "If my dad catches you in here, you're going to be sorry," I said, loud enough to be heard in the next room.

"I'm quaking," Billy quipped dryly, and I caught myself rolling my eyes again. "Where *are* your parents?"

I put the bell peppers I bought in a colander and set it in the sink, pausing to answer before turning on the water, "My dad's out. I don't know where he went." My fingers scrubbed over the rubbery skin of the peppers as I ran them under the faucet.

It was an honest answer—I didn't know where he'd gone today. How

could I? Though, I knew that wasn't exactly the answer he was looking for. This time, Billy's voice was closer, easier to hear—and I knew he was probably in the kitchen now. "And your mom?"

Turning off the water, I gave a shake of my head. Avoiding the topic of my mother was always easy in social situations. Even the stupid teens at my school knew when to give it up. Or, at least they knew how to tell when they weren't gonna get an answer. So, I left it at a head shake, and dug a cutting board out of the lower cupboards.

This recipe was fairly easy. I knew it by heart now, though I wouldn't have known it existed without my mother. There were still vivid memories in my mind of the first time I helped her make it. I stood on a stool by the counter and she guided my hand on the knife handle, making me feel like I was doing something important even though I wasn't really doing much.

It was all in her enthusiasm. She made it a big, fun production that I couldn't wait to participate in. Now, I exhaled some stress as I tried to focus on not cutting off a finger, dicing up the peppers. "What about *your* parents? Your dad, your mom?" I asked, briefly glancing up from the knife.

"*Step*-mom," Billy corrected, leaning his hip into the side of the counter two feet to my left. "They're working."

Nodding slowly, I absentmindedly scrunched my lips—something I did often when focusing. Steve always poked fun at me for it. A part of me wondered if Billy would even notice. After a moment of silence, he pushed off the counter with a sigh, and took a step toward me. "Why don't I help you out?" he offered.

My hands froze and I looked up at him with raised eyebrows, "Do you even know how to cook?"

"Do you know how to run your mouth?"

Rolling my eyes, I stepped away from the cutting board to rinse off my hands in the sink. "Wash your hands and start cutting," I begrudgingly instructed. "I'm going to cook some noodles."

Billy shrugged off his jacket, stepping out of the kitchen to toss it onto the back of the couch, before walking by me to the sink. I gathered the boxes of lasagna noodles and put them on the counter beside the stove, then dug back into the cupboards for a stew pot. "You do this a lot?" Billy asked, his voice fitting in between the sounds of the knife hitting the cutting board. I found the stew pot in the very back of the cupboard, and I had to all but crawl inside the space to retrieve it. But, when I got it out, I carried it to the sink.

I turned on the water and put the pot beneath the stream. "Piss off my dad and win him back through his stomach? I don't know. Maybe once or twice a month?" I haphazardly answered, watching the waterline begin to rise inside the pot.

"Daddy dearest doesn't want you to have fun."

"Daddy dearest doesn't want me to get *pregnant*," I corrected, though that wasn't actually the reason for dad's anger. I hefted the pot out of the sink and carried it to the stove, continuing, "It's not that unreasonable."

Billy snorted, "Sounds like you *want* to be on a leash."

My torso twisted as I looked over my shoulder, glaring holes into the back of his head. Being pompous and arrogant came easily to him—all you needed was five seconds to figure that out. It rubbed my nerves the wrong way, but his attitude wasn't totally the reason for my annoyance. I was annoyed because he was right.

I did like having rules, I liked being held accountable. It made me feel like being a good person was possible. As if all the things I did in Denver could truly all stay in the past where they belonged. Maybe that made me sound crazy, but was it really so crazy to want to be *normal*?

Instead of fueling this conversation, I turned back to the pot on the stove and silently waited for the water inside to boil. There was nothing wrong with having structure. That's what I told myself as I dropped the lasagna noodles into the water. Then, I shuffled across the kitchen and rifled through the bags for the sausage. Instead, I found the onions.

It was hard to set them down onto the counter lightly. "Cut these next, alright?" I huffed, rolling them toward the cutting board. Then I dove back into the bags. "Where the hell is the sausage? Oh- wait."

Finally, I found it. I hurried back to the stove and hefted a frying pan onto a burner. "Hit a nerve with that one, huh?" Billy asked, though it was rhetorical in nature. Normally, I would assume it was some kind of taunt, but it sounded like a serious statement. Something about the way he said it was understanding.

Like he understood why his comment would cause this reaction, that it would trigger frustration and annoyance. He knew the reasoning and he understood. I chanced a glance over my shoulder and I shouldn't have—because he was glancing at me, too. And for the first time in a long time, I *wanted* to talk. I wanted to start talking and refuse to stop until it was all out there.

Those blue eyes spoke a thousand things, but the strongest words I could read, I'll never forget. My mouth absentmindedly opened and shut the second I realized what spilling my guts would do. I didn't need that—I didn't need to start crying, I didn't need to relive the last two years of my life, I didn't need any of it. Yet still, something inside me *wanted* it.

Maybe that moment would've ended differently if I'd said something, but instead I was lurched back to reality with the thud of the knife hitting the cutting board and a sharp hiss. The knife clattered across the counter as Billy lurched away, "*Shit*."

I gasped, blinking a few times as I came to, and I hurried over. "What did you do?" I questioned, grabbing his wrist to force his hand closer. "Let me see."

It was hard to tell if it was a deep cut due to the thick line of reed oozing from an inch long carving on the side of his left index finger. "*Watch* it," Billy winced, threatening to pull away.

With a sound similar to a *tsk*, I put my other hand on the side of his arm and pushed until he got the message, shuffling across the kitchen toward the sink. "Don't be a baby," I said, still grasping his wrist as I reached to turn on the faucet. There was a first aid kit under the sink

in the hall bathroom, but I wanted to make sure it wouldn't need stitches.

We'd have to go to a hospital for that—there's no way I could do that myself. A simple band aid, I could do. I made sure the water was lukewarm before pulling his wrist toward the stream. And, surprisingly enough, he let me do it. The water splashed over the cut and he swore under his breath, but he didn't move.

I turned his wrist a little to better examine the depth of the cut once the blood was finally washed away. It didn't look too deep to me. I wasn't a doctor, but I'd seen my fair share of abrasions—which was a morbid thought when you considered my age. In what world is a seventeen year old girl familiar with cuts and bruises? A sick one. "It doesn't look that bad," I thought aloud, selfishly relieved.

"What doesn't look bad?"

The hair at the nape of my neck stood upright the second my father's voice touched my ears, and I twisted quickly to see behind us. Sure enough, dad stood at the entrance to the kitchen with a confused, apprehensive look coloring his face. "Oh, um- hey, dad," I tried not to look nervously surprised. "We had a little accident—it's fine, though. A band aid will fix it."

He took steps into the kitchen, his eyes never leaving that space just to my left—the space occupied by Billy. "Oh, I hate it when that happens. Why don't you go get the first aid kit, sweetheart?" dad suggested, finally turning his gaze toward me. If you didn't know him well, you'd think he was genuinely okay with this whole situation.

"O-okay," I nodded quickly, before reaching for the paper towels. I ripped a couple from the roll as best I could and then pressed them to the cut on Billy's finger. "Hold these here—I'll be right back."

Billy did as I instructed, but a second too soon. His uninjured hand moved to cover the paper towels where my hand still remained, and the quick swipe of warmth from his skin was enough to put a flutter in my stomach, a momentary uneasiness that caused me to pull away quickly. I gave a small smile and hurried from the kitchen, avoiding eye contact with my dad.

I rued the conversation that would ensue the second I left. So, I speed-walked down the hall to the bathroom and tried to find the first aid kit as fast as I could. My hands knocked over a few things as I rummaged beneath the sink but, ultimately, they found the small first aid kit. I snatched it from the cabinet and hurried back into the hall. The second I entered the space, I could hear my father's voice.

Listening in on other conversations wasn't a habit of mine—but I found myself slowing to a stop, standing just before the entrance to the kitchen, out of sight. Dad was talking quietly but seriously, saying things I couldn't believe were coming out of his mouth. There was no need for me to spill my guts—he was doing it for me, in so many words. Explaining the difficult time I had in Denver as though it were simply a symptom of teenage emotions, and it was painful to listen to patronizing phrasing.

"That being said," dad said, still keeping quiet. "I don't wanna see you around here after tonight. Leave her alone. Understand?"

It made my blood boil to think about how many times he'd done that before. Innocent me thought that people avoided me because they didn't like me. There were many instances of possible friends coming over to hang out and then giving me some bullshit excuse to never do it again. Was this the reason, the whole time? It made my blood boil. I could understand if it were simply my personality—but this was something else entirely.

I understood his intentions. Though, it didn't stop me from hating everything about it. Exhaling heavily, I stepped into the kitchen entrance. "Dad?" I was fighting the urge to scream, to cry, to hide. But he turned to look at me, and I forced myself to continue, "Can we talk? In private?"

"Of course, sweetheart," dad easily agreed, obliviously.

Before stepping away, I put the first aid kit on the counter—then I walked down the hall with dad on my heels. "What were you doing?" I questioned, as we stepped into my room. I tried to simply sound curious but the anger was bleeding through. Dad had just closed the door behind him. His expression contorted into one of confusion, seeing right through me, and he shook his head.

"What are you talking about-?"

"How many times, dad? Who *else* have you told to stay away from me?" I demanded, anger festering just below the surface of my skin. His shoulders slumped as he sighed, and I jumped on that small gesture of defeat. "Do you have *any* idea what it has been like for me, going through this transition with only *one* friend—who, by the way, is going off to college in a couple months?"

Dad's hands settled on his waist, and I knew he was offended, "Elizabeth, I think I know a little something about how hard this has been. I've been here the whole time. I'm the one that's been taking care of you, looking out for you."

"How am I supposed to get back to normal with you deciding no one is *worthy* of me?" my voice shot up in volume as my hands rocketed out at my sides in a fit of frustration.

"That boy wants nothing more than to get in your pants, Betsy—just like the rest of them, just like *Adam*," he defended, leaning forward as his voice turned hard.

"Don't you dare," I held up a finger, taking a step back. "Don't you *dare* compare him to that bastard. You don't even know him—"

"And *you* do? You want normalcy, I understand. But you *cannot* let yourself fall right back into the same place you were," he was frustrated now, too, tossing his hands spitefully. "And that's exactly what's going to happen if you start hanging around with people like *that*."

"Just give me a chance, dad, *please*—let me prove to you, to *myself*, that I'm okay now. That I'm not going to make that mistake again. Just one chance. If I blow it, you can punish me however you want to. But I just need to try, dad. I *really* need to try."

"You come home at an ungodly hour, drunk off your ass and reeking of cigarette smoke, and now you want me to give you *more* leeway? You know how that sounds, don't you?"

He stared at me silently, and I tried not to cry. I tried not to let it get

to me. Holding my breath seemed to be the only way to make it happen. It wasn't hard to see how it must've looked to him, given his perspective, but still I held my ground and pleaded. Letting my eyes do the talking as he was doing with his.

We stood there in silence for a long moment, before his arms fell to his sides and he turned away with a heavy huff. "I will give you one—and *only* one—pass. Do you hear me? You come home like that again, and there will be *serious* consequences. I'm not playing around this time, Betsy," he told me, sternly.

I nodded quickly, sniffing hard, "Yeah. I understand."

Though still visibly frustrated by the conversation, he nodded once to dismiss me, and I was quick to leave the room. My feet carried me to the kitchen whilst my hands frantically checked my cheeks for water. Thankfully, my face was dry, though it felt like my throat was about to close in on itself. I tried to shake off my nerves as I reentered the kitchen.

Billy was leaning back against the counter, palms pressed against the counter top on either side. He readjusted his position to gesture toward the stove, and I glanced in that direction as he said, "I put the sausage in the pan."

That, he did. The frying pan I'd gotten out earlier was sizzling over a burner, with near-done meat inside. I nodded, trying to remember where I was at in the recipe before I left, and mumbled a *thank you*. It took me a second, but I knew that the peppers and onions needed to go into the pan as well, so I worked on that next.

I walked to the cutting board and dug a bowl out from the cupboards below, then scooped the peppers into it and set it aside. "Hey," my head turned instinctively when I heard Billy speak. His arms were folded over his chest, and he leaned toward me against the counter. "You okay?"

The most simple and most obvious answer was *no*. But I pushed my hair behind my ears and nodded, pulling my lips tight. "Yeah, I'm- i'm fine," I said, a blatant lie. I didn't wait for more words—I simply continued cooking. The best thing for me was to get my mind off of

the stress of the week, the stress of the night, and lose myself in a project.

Drawing was usually how I did that. Though, I would have to do it by cooking this time. "How's your finger?" I asked, dicing the onion and adding it to the bowl of peppers.

Billy grunted, "Hasn't fallen off yet."

In my peripheral, I could see the figure of my father, walking into the living room and sitting on the couch. He rarely ever sat there and actually watched the television—so I assumed he was cleaning up the papers he always left sprawled across the coffee table. Sighing, I added the bowl of ingredients to the sausage.

By then, the noodles were done, and I could dump them into the colander in the sink. Then I found the casserole dish in the cupboards and started the layering process. Billy didn't ask before helping out with the pan on the stove. He simply shuffled over and did it. Given how stressed I was, I was genuinely thankful for the help.

I wasn't as picky as I would've been had my day gone better. The casserole dish was full and ready to go into the oven when a knock sounded on the door—and my stomach dropped. It was most likely Steve, given that I'd invited him over at lunch. Adding him to the mix was not the best idea. But I didn't have the time to tell my dad that before he answered the door.

Sure enough, Steve walked into the house, just as I was putting the casserole in the oven. "Wow, something smells good in here, Mr. Reed," he said, his voice gaining volume as he neared the kitchen. Seconds later, he stepped up to the kitchen entrance, dad right behind him.

"Betsy's at it again in the kitchen," dad replied, carefree, as though we didn't talk at all.

I looked up as Steve's face fell, his brow furrowing as he looked over Billy, who was back to leaning into the counter behind me. There wasn't a word spoken for a silent second. And then Steve turned to me, his jaw tense. "What the hell is he doing here?" he asked,

pointing quietly.

"He gave me a ride home so I invited him to dinner," I answered, realizing the lie as I was speaking. I quickly looked to Billy, "You're staying, right?"

"As long as you want, Bets," he smirked, unfolding his arms to brace against the counter.

"Dear god," Steve groaned.

"The lasagna's going to take an hour, so we could hang out, maybe watch something while we wait?" I suggested, turning back to Steve with a hopeful expression. Steve stared at me like I was crazy—and maybe I was just a little? After all, I was suggesting that Steve be civil with his mortal enemy. That was absolutely insane.

For a moment, it seemed like Steve wasn't going to budge. I wouldn't have blamed him if he hadn't—not really. But he crossed his arms with a sigh, "What did you have in mind?" and I felt an ounce of hope in my chest.

"Flashdance?"

"Fine."

Steve's eyes rolled into the back of his head as he turned for the living room. I breathed a sigh of relief and headed back down the hall to my bedroom. There was no reason why I couldn't lose myself in cooking and in a drawing all in the same night. So I got a sketchpad and a pencil from my room, and then walked to the living room.

When I returned, Steve was sitting on the floor in front of the television, sifting through the small box of VHS tapes stored beside it. Billy was draped onto the far end of the couch and dad had found a way to make himself scarce without me knowing. He was most likely in his room, dealing with the papers from the table.

I dropped onto the couch near where Steve sat on the floor and tucked my feet beneath me. "What are you doing?" I asked, trying to peer over Steve's shoulder. He was obviously reading the labels of

every tape, but I didn't know why. He knew how I organized my VHS tapes.

"*Betsy's skate routine*, seventy-seven," Steve read a label aloud, holding up the tape. His expression was excited, like he'd just found the holy grail of VHS tapes, and he twisted in his position to see those of us on the couch. "I gotta see this."

"Steve, don't you dare," I gave him a warning look.

He ignored me, lunging for the player. I let out a long groan as I dropped my head into my hands. "Wait a second—what kind of skating are we talking about here?" Billy asked, intrigued.

Steve answered, visibly irked by the sound of Billy's voice, "Figure skating."

I lifted my head, sitting back just as the tape began to play, and my eyes followed a smaller version of me across the screen. At ten years old, figure skating was my only passion—mostly thanks to my mom. I cringed at the embarrassing look of my younger self. "Isn't she just adorable?" Steve commented, patronizingly.

"*That's* you?"

"Unfortunately," I nodded slowly.

"I'll be damned."

Glancing to Billy's end of the couch, I held my breath. He wore a smile that lit up the rest of his face, watching the screen as he leaned back into the couch, folding his arms behind his head. The embarrassment faded as a thought quickly entered my mind, and I opened my sketchbook.

My pencil danced across the page in a controlled fury, outlining every detail my mind could comprehend. A sharp jaw and soft eyes, curls behind the ears and laugh lines that felt like a privilege to see. Steve continued rifling through the VHS tapes, and he put in another skating video.

It was from when I was twelve—I knew that just from color of my

outfit. Mom picked it out. She was in the hospital for treatment, so I brought some options to her room. Involving her made it feel like she wasn't really gone. Like she was there with me even so far away. *Redbone* played softly through the speakers and I sighed.

This was arguably my best work overall, but it was still embarrassing to look back on. "You know, that was a really good look for you," Steve said, shaking a finger at the television. I looked up from my sketchbook and Steve tilted his head, pushing his lower lip out. "Pigtails. Do those again."

I scoffed, "Are you kidding? They were scary enough to be my Halloween costume."

"I think they were cute," Steve shrugged, then turned back to the VHS box.

"Well, blame mom for that monstrosity."

I continued to sketch the image in my head, not daring another look for fear someone might catch on. But my hand slowed when I heard the subject's voice ask a somewhat unexpected question. "Is she why you stopped skating?" Billy asked, with an unbridled curiosity.

"She was the only reason I started, so doing it made me think of her," I explained, slowly, choosing my words carefully. "When she died...I just couldn't do it anymore."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen."

"That fucking sucks, Bets. I'm sorry."

My eyes wanted to narrow, my head threatening to tilt—every ounce of me skeptical. It was unlike the personality I'd seen to be sympathetic at all. But my train of thought snapped back to that moment in the kitchen. When I felt the urge to rip out my heart and show it to him, tell the stories behind every scar, every open wound.

It caused me to pause a moment before even attempting to open my mouth. Instead, I sat there in silent confusion, staring at the teen boy

on the other side of the couch. He stared back, just as unwavering. Suddenly, Steve sputtered the beginnings of a few words, prying my eyes away to narrow at him curiously. "Okay, I'm sorry, but- *Bets?* Did I miss something—when did that become a thing?" he questioned, primarily looking at me.

"It's not," I shook my head.

"Whatever you say, Bets," Billy replied, a smirk evident in his voice. My head snapped in his direction as the annoyance began to crawl back in. He looked ahead at the television, but there was in fact a smirk hanging loosely off his lips.

Steve pretended to gag, but it was so forceful I almost believed it was real. "Jesus christ," he mumbled, as he turned back to the VHS box. My muscles jolted in a startle at the sound of the timer finally blaring in the kitchen.

I was quick to fold my sketchbook closed and push off the couch, "Thank god. Dinner's ready."

5. Propositions

Steve pulled plates down from the cupboards above the stove as I rounded up the right silverware from a drawer by the sink. "Dad! Dinner!" I shouted, leaning backward toward the kitchen entrance. I tried to mentally prepare myself for the scenario that was about to play out. Putting Steve and my dad together was no issue—they were jovial from the moment they met. But adding Billy, someone they both despise, in that duo just might cause problems.

I tried to think of what could go wrong so that I could be prepared, have all of my bases covered as I put the silverware on the table. As I circled the table, Steve walked behind me, laying down the plates. "So, uh, you two are hanging out now?" he was quiet, speaking words only for me to hear. I glanced up from my task as he continued, "That was pretty quick."

"He gave me a ride home, like I said. Dad was being a dick about him being here so I had to let him stay," I shrugged, moving onto the next setting.

Steve snorted a little, "Yeah. Naturally."

"Please be nice, Steve. It's weird but it doesn't have to be awkward."

"Talking about me already, I see," Billy's presence was announced by his arrogant sarcasm, preceding him into the room. He walked straight for the table from the hall, and I sighed as I set the last place setting.

Dad entered the room a moment later, and I decided to let the comment go. There was no point engaging in it with him in the room—not when Billy would only further sexualize everything said. A part of me wanted to try it. The anger I felt from what my father had said was still there, only mildly faded away. It wanted to come out. It wanted to cause chaos. Something about it sounded like fun, and I took a deep breath to keep myself at bay.

Usually when Steve is over for dinner, he sits across from me while dad takes his seat at the head of the table. There was never a need for

the fourth chair. Though, we'd kept it around anyway for a reason I wasn't sure of. Maybe for mom, in a sense? Dad would know but I wasn't about to ask. I passed Steve and Billy and slipped into the kitchen. The casserole dish was still pretty hot, so I used pot holders to carry it from the counter to the table.

Dad, sure enough, was sat at the head of the table when I returned. Steve took his usual place across from mine. Nothing much was different except for the body in the far left chair. I placed the dish on the table and promptly slipped into my seat, sitting down a second before dad spoke up. "It looks amazing, sweetheart," he praised, giving me a closed-mouthed smile.

Anyone who knew us could tell that was not the smile he typically gave to me. It wasn't too obvious—but it was awkward for him. I could see that quite easily. "Hopefully it tastes just the same," I nodded a little, returning the tight-lipped gesture.

Steve looked to dad, and dad gestured for Steve to go first, so he dug into the lasagna. Heaping himself a serving, he gave a look of appreciation at the stringy cheese. "I added extra for you," I told him, referring to the dairy product. He gave a hearty chuckle, finally sitting back in his seat, and dad reached to dish up next.

"You're evil, you know that?" Steve leaned forward a little, aiming his fork at me in a gesture before digging into his dinner.

I shrugged, smiling innocently, "It's not my fault you guys love food."

"If I didn't, I'd be dead."

"You can eat something without loving it."

"True," Steve nodded. He suddenly grimaced, looking upward, and added, "Like Mrs. Wheeler's meatloaf. I'm spoiled, Betsy. And it's your fault."

Dad passed the serving spoon to me and put a small square of the meal on my plate. I wasn't too hungry after the day I had, so I left it at that and handed the utensil off to Billy. "Well, stop crawling through my window looking for leftovers," I told Steve, turning back

to my plate.

"Through your window?" Billy questioned. There was a hint of something hardened mixed in with the curiosity this time, something defensive. I knew what I had said might sound a little odd to someone who didn't already know, but I didn't expect that response. Most people who knew thought it was funny. Not worrisome. Steve Harrington was too much of a goody-two-shoes for that.

"Yeah, they started doing it a few weeks after we moved in," dad answered, causing my head to snap in his direction with a surprised expression. He looked at me, and his features turned lightheartedly sour. "What? You think I don't hear you clanking around in the kitchen at all hours of the night?"

"But why the window?" Billy persisted, glancing from Steve to me.

Steve looked a little uncomfortable across the table, but not because the question was private—I could tell he wasn't at all enjoying Billy's presence in general. "Because none of your business, man," Steve answered, giving Billy an annoyed side-glance.

Instinctively, my knee jerked, sending my leg forward and the front of my shoe into Steve's shin beneath the table. Steve jerked, rattling the silverware on the table. His eyes quickly met mine as his features were colored in with pain and further annoyance. "Not this again," dad sighed, putting his fork down. "Do I need to separate you?"

"No, sir," Steve mumbled, giving me a hard glare before turning back to his plate. Exhaling heavily through my nose, I sat back in my seat and picked up my fork, poking at the food on my plate.

"So, Mr. Reed—why'd you guys move all the way out here?" Billy innocently asked, instantly drawing my eyes. He wore a smugly slanted grin as his eyes darted toward me and then back to my dad. I could tell Steve was looking, too, in my peripheral. He knew this wasn't something we Reeds talked about with many people, but especially not outsiders.

Even asking was sometimes a cardinal sin. Dad took the question in stride, wiping the corners of his mouth before answering calmly. "We

needed something new after Betsy's mother passed, and I had some employment opportunities in this area," he told Billy. The answer wasn't a total lie, but it was missing its heart.

Billy only nodded slowly before turning his eyes to his plate—and I knew he didn't buy it. My eyes moved across the table to Steve, who was already looking in my direction with a relieved expression, but I pursed my lips. Steve only knitted his brow and gave me a you're ridiculous glance.

The rest of dinner was mostly shop talk. Dad mentioned bumping into Billy's dad and step-mother at the post office, which spurred on a conversation about a weird noise in his dad's Ford. Steve was clueless to a lot of it but he'd ask the occasional question to affirm what he'd picked up from hanging out with me in the garage.

Conversation was guided to Billy's car when dad brought it up—the make and model of it, to be specific. Dad always liked Camaro's. "You should hear it run, dad," I finally piped up, looking to the head of the table. "Only in my dreams would Dorothy sound that nice."

"Well, your mother bought her before you were born—and even then, she bought her used," dad reminded, citing her age for her problems.

"Who's Dorothy?" Billy questioned.

Steve let out a chuckle, and I tilted my head in a disapproving look from across the table. "Sorry," he mumbled, before returning to his almost-finished plate.

Sighing, I glanced at Billy, "It's my car. The one in the garage."

"That Mustang? It's beautiful," he replied, like a genuine car enthusiast. "What's wrong with it?"

"Oh- I just haven't had time to replace the radiator. I'm gonna work on it tonight."

"I didn't know you worked on cars, too."

"She's basically a mechanic," Steve said, around a mouthful. "Man, this girl single-handedly saved my- err- backside. I thought the car

was a goner—my dad would've killed me."

"Steve, stop," I averted my eyes, sitting back in my seat as I tried not to seem embarrassed. It was ridiculous, the way Steve gushed about me. The cooking, the garage work—everything possible. If I can do it, Steve has bragged about it obnoxiously.

On one hand, I really did appreciate the unwavering support and encouragement. On the other, it was almost like his version of pulling out the baby pictures the second someone new was around. "It's true," he defended, innocently.

I rolled my eyes a little, putting my fork down. Sometimes I couldn't tell which was worse, what he said or the fact that he said it, but both were high on the list. Finally dinner was winding down and I got up to clear the dishes. Steve got up a second after I did to help.

It was something we usually did together anyway. "You wash, I'll dry?" he asked, rhetorically, as he walked around the end of the table with a plate in each hand. I nodded and followed him into the kitchen. We put all the dishes into the sink and I ran the water.

Steve leaned his lower back into the counter beside the sink and crossed his arms with a sigh, and I could tell he was watching the dining room out of the corner of my eye. "He's really good at pretending to be decent, I'll give him that," he said, quietly.

"He was decent before you got here," I replied, tiredly, as I scrubbed a plate with a soapy sponge.

His head turned toward me, "How so?"

"He gave me a ride, carried my groceries, and offered to help make dinner without being prompted," I listed, thinking. "We know who he is at school, Steve. Think about it—what do we even know about him?"

"Uh...that he's an asshole," Steve answered, as though it was obvious. An involuntarily heavy sigh escaped me then. I couldn't disagree. But I wanted to know more, primarily because I'd seen a glimpse of something I wanted to witness fully, and I couldn't do that if I didn't

pursue it.

I handed off the first plate to Steve and he began to dry it as I picked up the second. There was no point in arguing with him at all, and if I couldn't disagree what could I say? So, I didn't respond. I simply scrubbed the rest of the plates quietly, listening to the voices from the dining room as Billy sparked up a conversation with my dad.

For someone who instantly hated him, dad sure had no problem talking to him. It almost seemed like the bitterness had worn off but I knew better than to believe that. Not so soon. As we finished with the dishes, dad excused himself back to his room, and I knew it was to further deal with paperwork.

He would stay up ungodly late fairly frequently, especially recently. Every time it was to wrestle with finances. That was the one part of the business dad had always refused to involve me in. But I didn't mind—I knew he would eventually. Billy shoved his arms through the sleeves of his jacket as he stepped toward the start of the kitchen.

Steve was just shoving the late plate in the cupboard, shutting the door with an already annoyed expression. I rolled my eyes. "Going home?" I asked, looking to Billy.

"Yeah. Thanks for dinner, Bets—it was great," he smoothly replied.

"I'll walk you out."

I pat-dried my hands on the kitchen towel and then walked quickly toward the front door, trying to get out before Steve could try to keep me inside. He wouldn't have kept me in even if I'd moved slowly. I needed the fresh air, and I needed the break.

Opening the door, I stepped out onto the small porch, Billy a couple steps behind me. "Pretty tense in there," he noted, digging a hand into his jacket pocket as the other closed the door after us. A cigarette and his lighter were unearthed in his palm.

"Yeah...lotta men thinking they know what's best for me. It gets crowded," I replied, folding my arms over my chest to ward off the breeze.

Billy lit his cigarette and took a long pull, before blowing the smoke to the side of us. "Y'know...if there's one thing I'm good at, it's gettin' rid of stress," he said, his eyes on mine. "And it sounds like you need to relax."

It was a little vague, but I was no idiot. The faux seriousness of his features was breaking, threatening to fade away completely with a small smirk, and my eyebrows slowly crept higher on my forehead. "Thanks...I'll write that down," I spoke slowly, letting it sink in in my mind.

"Night, Bets." Billy smirked fully now, scrutinizing my face a second longer before he started down the steps toward the driveway, blowing more smoke. I knew, as I watched him walk away, that he just told me I could come to him for sex.

As if that would somehow solve all of my problems. Or, at least, make me feel better dealing with it all. It just might have. But I wasn't about to make the school gossip a reality. I spent the rest of the night hanging out with Steve in the garage, working on Dorothy's radiator replacement.

Things needed removed in order to get to the radiator. The actual replacement would take place in the morning. I slept uneasy. Tossing and turning, unable to settle in and truly get comfortable. There were many reasons for it and it wasn't necessarily unusual for me, so I didn't think too much of it. I simply took the early morning as an opportunity to get Dorothy's radiator replaced sooner.

That way she'd be fired up and ready for the drive to school. I crawled out of bed and landed in the fuzzy boots my grandma sent me last year, then shuffled down to the garage. Dorothy was still there as I left her, with her hood up, parts strewn across the concrete in front of her.

I jumped right into the work, pushing up my sleeves and unpacking the new radiator from its box. Replacing a radiator wasn't too difficult as I'd done it twice before on different cars. It depended on what kind of car you were dealing with, though. Some were easier to get to than others.

Dorothy had a habit of making things difficult for me—but this was fairly easy. I just got the last part put back in when dad came into the garage, announcing breakfast like the pancakes he made were made with gold sprinkles. "When'd you get up?" he inquired, as I closed Dorothy's hood.

"An hour or two ago," I answered, honestly.

He shook his head at me, "You need to stop with the late nights, Elizabeth. Sleep is essential at your age. You're growing—you need all the energy you can get. Okay?"

"I'll tell my body that next time."

I smiled loosely as I passed him, walking to the stairs. We sat at the table and ate breakfast before departing the house with the usual pleasantries—have a good day, don't cause trouble, pay attention in class. Though, that wasn't something I needed to be told. Most times it seemed like I was the only one paying attention in class.

Dorothy started fine, despite the work I knew still needed to be done, and I drove to school. Driving alone made me wonder about Alice. The last time I talked to her was when she forfeited a ride home in order to talk to Billy in the school parking lot. Obviously, that went nowhere. But where was Alice?

Did I even want to know? After all, we weren't the definition of real friendship. We weren't like me and Steve. I turned on the morning radio to drown myself out. Too much thinking, too early in the morning. I was back to being on time to school. That was good. Although, my brain was so preoccupied, I wasn't sure how focused I would be.

I parked in a spot not too far from the school entrance, in the general area of where I usually parked. My plan was again to take as many notes as possible and deal with the homework later. That would work best for today. I'd made sure to put an extra notebook in my bag before leaving the house.

It was colder this morning, and I wished I'd worn a thicker sweater as I made my way into the school, pulling my denim jacket closed over

my chest. Steve was standing by the door when I walked in. He pushed off the lockers and fell into step with me, saying a peppy, "Morning!"

"I appreciate leaving out 'good'," I replied, giving him a raised brow.

"That bad, huh?" he cringed.

Sighing, I shrugged, "Just not good."

"Well, I mean—you know if you need to talk, I'm here."

"Can I ask you a personal question?" I asked, as we reached my locker. I dialed in the combination and pulled open the door, rearranging my books while Steve answered.

He leaned a shoulder into the locker next to mine, crossing his arms, "Uh- yeah. How personal are we talking?"

My movements slowed as I thought about it. Maybe a little too personal for the average person, but Steve and I were closer than that. Weren't we? "Think...the talk, as a genre," I answered, glancing up at him.

"Oh no—uh, I don't think I'm qualified to handle that conversation," Steve spoke sarcastically, shaking his head in exaggeration. "Your dad should've told you that by now—"

"No! You dork," I playfully hit his arm, and he barked a laugh.

"Alright, out with it. What's up?"

"When you and Nancy were dating, did you ever feel...less stressed after hooking up?"

My eyes were narrowed as I carefully worded my question. Steve's eyes wandered to the right, over my shoulder an ounce, as his features were met with a dumbfounded expression. "Um..." he paused, thinking. "I mean...yeah, I guess. I'm pretty sure it does that for everybody."

"So, if you were really stressed out and you had the chance to do

that, would you?" I asked a follow-up. It was less embarrassing to ask the second question. Getting the first one out of the way broke the ice enough to not fear his reaction.

Steve squinted at me as he blinked several times, readjusting his stance against the lockers, "Who's offering you sex, Betsy?"

"This is a hypothetical."

"Well, what kind of hypothetical is that? Why would you just ask that out of nowhere?"

"Steve! Can you please answer the question?"

"I mean...I guess, depending on who was offering and how desperate I was," he finally answered, with a sigh. His eyes still read concern and I knew that meant he would ask again. So, I tried to steer the conversation away from the topic then.

Though, I wasn't sure if that would actually fill in the hole I'd just dug. I closed my locker door and turned to face him, mirroring his position with my shoulder leaned against the lockers, and folded my arms. "I've been thinking about babysitting again," I told him, changing the subject. "Maybe just on the weekends—but it would help me afford Dorothy's upkeep."

"Don't you work in the garage?" he asked, slightly confused.

I shrugged up one shoulder, "We can't really afford it."

"Well, you know if you need a ride, my passenger seat's always open."

I smiled a little, leaning the side of my head against the metal. "You're way too good to me, Steve Harrington," I pointed out, before pushing off the lockers. "Be careful with that. I'll see you at lunch?"

His eyebrows knitted, but quickly fell slack as I walked backward away from him, heading down the hall toward my class. "Yeah," he nodded. I nodded in return and swiveled on my heel to walk forward, inhaling deeply.

I'd thought about it all through first and second period—toying with

the idea of actually accepting Billy's offer. Why would I, though? I kept asking myself that. It wasn't like I was just waiting for some hunk to come by and sweep me off my feet. And it wasn't like I needed sex.

But, the more I thought about it, the more I wanted it. Was that wrong? Wouldn't that be playing into all the rumors, labeling myself with those awful names? "Probably not," I whispered aloud, shuffling along the hallway between classes. "Definitely not."

It was swirling around my head so much it almost made me dizzy, and I was frustrated that the temptation hadn't gone away by the time lunch rolled around. Steve and I sat outside at a bench and his friend, Robin, joined us. We were in different grades and she hadn't hung out with us much, so I didn't have much of an opinion of her.

Though, she seemed nice, and if she was a friend of Steve's she was probably going to be a friend of mine. So I didn't mind the addition to our lunch duo. Usually, the triplet was Nancy. But Robin was a refreshing change. I didn't eat much, if anything at all.

There was too much on my mind. Steve didn't say it, but I could tell he noticed. His eyes were shifty and his expression was clearly meant to hide his nervous concern, but he kept talking as though it didn't exist. "What are your summer plans, Betsy?" Robin asked, turning away from Steve with a look that screamed help me.

Exhaling, I sat up a little bit, "Um...work. That's all I got."

"Same here," she sighed, widening her eyes momentarily for emphasis. My eyes drifted at the echoes of voices, sparing a quick glance to the right. Suddenly I was looking at Alice. She laughed with Trinity and a few girls I didn't know, before turning to walk in our direction.

It caused me to sigh, if only for the sake of habit. Alice walked with a pep in her step to our bench, hand clutching the bag strap on her shoulder, and she smiled at all of us. "Hey, guys," she greeted, as though she hadn't gone dark for a day. "Mind if I join?"

Instinctively, I scooted over to make a space. "Yeah, sure," Steve

shrugged, glancing sporadically between Alice and me. She dropped onto the bench beside me and let her bag fall to the ground beside the table. Robin looked at Alice indifferently, but Steve's eyes were narrowed just a little.

"What are you guys up to?" Alice asked, curiously.

"Summer plans," Robin said, uninterested. "Got any?"

"Oh, sure! I'm vacationing to Florida—my dad's got family there."

I knew that. Her dad's family is in Florida and her mother's is in New York. Her parents met at college, the name of which escaped me in the moment—though I knew I'd been told. There was a lot I knew about Alice. We were friends, after all. Although, if you asked, she probably couldn't tell you my middle name.

That thought seemed a little too bitter, but it was stuck there. Souring my mood and abolishing the remains of my appetite. "So? How'd it go with Billy the other day?" I piped up, bracing my elbow against the table with my chin on my fist.

I feigned interest, brightening my eyes and forcing a small but cheeky smile. Alice chuckled a little, giving my shoulder the tiniest of shoves, and she looked at the ground. "It didn't, really," she shook her head. "But there's still hope."

I hummed and asked, "Got a plan?"

Her head turned toward me, though it took a second for her eyes to meet mine. "Not really. Why? Have you heard something?" she asked me. Of course she would defer to the school gossip. Here I thought she knew I didn't listen to that. At least, not all of it.

A sudden bark cut through the air like a hot knife and I found myself immediately sitting upright, eyes searching, wandering over the surrounding area until I found what my body wanted to find. Billy was smoking across the lot with his usual posse, all of them being loud and unusually obnoxious. "Something," I answered Alice after a moment. "I'll be right back."

As I pushed myself up from the table, Steve's eyes darted over his

shoulder, then whipped back to me covered in shades of realization and worry. Like the answer to his questions earlier had finally been answered—and he didn't like what he heard. "Betsy—"

"It's fine," I told him, walking by him in my path toward the other side of the lot. I stuffed my hands into my pockets as I walked, crushing leaves beneath my boots, and it was hard not to feel a little on display. It was like I'd thrown myself naked onto a stage and I was totally exposed. I knew no one was looking—but my nerves nagged at me regardless.

Yards away, Billy noticed me approaching, and a smirk coated his lips as he blew out a cloud of smoke. "Well, well, well," he mused. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"We need to talk."

I snatched the cigarette from between his fingers as he lifted it to lips and kept walking, steering away from the small group of rowdy boys snickering and making comments, and I took a drag. Billy scoffed behind me, and I could hear his footsteps as he followed. "What about, princess?"

"I think you're right," I answered, breathing out the smoke before turning to face him, far enough away from the others. He sauntered toward me with an eyebrow risen, so I continued, "I need to relax. A little bird told me you're really good for that."

My fingers lifted the cigarette to my lips again as I watched Billy's reaction. It was generally surprised, but intrigued and his eyes read excitement. Although, that only lasted a moment before he stepped closer to me, lowering his voice, "Y'know, best place for that's out on Cornwallis—at that Motel Six."

"Really? I get the best place?"

"Bets, if I'm gonna fuck you, I'm gonna do it right."

Blowing the smoke to the left, I tilted my head. "Chivalry is alive and well. What would you say is the best hour for this procedure?" I asked, purposely looking up through my lashes as I folded my arms,

still holding up the cigarette.

No heat rushed to my cheeks—instead, my near-empty stomach took a roll. It was hard not to walk away too soon, make a break for it back to my friends and never dare to turn around. After a moment, Billy answered, "Nine o'clock."

"Guess I'll just have to meet you there, then."

He cocked his head, smirking, "Guess you will."

I took one last drag from the cigarette and, this time, I didn't hesitate to blow it back in his face. Slowly, with an unwavering expression, trying to hide the heart I knew was beating right out of my chest. When I handed the cigarette over and started back toward my friends, they were all staring at me, but only one pair of eyes lifted the hair at the back of my neck—and it was behind me.

6. Motel Six

The bright Motel Six sign illuminated the parking space as I backed in, put it in park and cut the engine. Agreeing to this was overly regrettable. More so than the intoxicated decision to make-out with Billy in front of my house. Yet I came anyway, in jeans and the tightest tank top I owned, wearing perfume for the first time in years.

It was the version of me from Denver that wanted this, that wanted him. But, still, I didn't stop myself when I got out of the car and shut the door. My eyes scanned the room numbers as I walked toward the building, landing soon on room two-fifteen. It was on the second level in the far right corner. The only room with a light on at this hour.

I made my way up the stairs and walked along the concrete balcony to the room. The air was cold at night but my hands shook enough to keep them in my pockets for a different reason. A part of me was scared—but not of intimacy. It was the fear of liking whatever it is I found on the other side of that door. Of wanting to keep it.

My knuckles hit the door three times, and I took a deep breath as I slid my hand back into my jacket pocket. Music played inside, muffled through the door, and it stopped a second after I knocked. Then, the door swung open. Billy leaned a forearm into the door above his head and smiled at me. Not a smirk, or a cocky grin—an actual smile. "Hi there," he said, smoothly.

Caught a little off guard, I smiled back, eyebrows drawn, "Um...hi."

"You hungry? Pizza was just delivered."

"Yeah, that sounds good."

His teeth sunk into his lower lip as he took a step back, giving me space to enter the room, and he gestured to usher me inside. Though still shaky, I walked in and he closed the door behind me softly. I didn't expect such a casual atmosphere. It was a surprise—one that might actually help me relax enough to enjoy this.

That's why I was there, wasn't it? Enjoyment? I shrugged off my jacket with an exhale and draped it over the back of a chair at the tiny table by the window. On the table was a pizza box. Billy didn't strike me as the kind of guy to buy you dinner first, but it was nice. "Sit down, stay awhile," he said, before dropping into the other chair.

He flicked open the pizza box as I lowered myself into the chair I'd hung my jacket on. "You didn't say anything about dinner," I pointed out, the corners of my mouth upturned as I braced my elbow on the table and dropped my chin into my palm.

"I told you—if I'm gonna fuck you, I'm gonna do it right," he smirked a response.

Heat flared in the flesh of my cheeks as my hand slipped into the pizza box, but I did my best to seem unbothered. That was what he said. But I hadn't known exactly what that was referring to at the time. "Thanks, I guess?" I chuckled a little, sounding awkward in my own ears.

Billy sat back in his chair, pizza slice in hand, "It's my pleasure."

My eyes quickly darted away as a thought crossed my brain that shouldn't have. When I dared to look back, he was smirking harder than before. He knew how I'd taken it. The reaction I gave was most likely his intention. I tried to focus on eating my slice of pizza, taking a bite as I crossed one knee over the other under the table.

"So, what else do you have planned for this clandestine meeting?" I asked, casually curious.

"Figured we'd eat and then watch a movie."

"That's very gentlemanly of you, Billy."

"Nothing but the best for you, Bets."

I found myself smiling a little too much. It was clearly an act. He knew better than anyone at the high school how to sweet talk his way into a woman's bed. But there was something about the warmth of the smile he gave me when he answered the door that made me want to believe it wasn't. "You're quite the sweet talker," I

commented, dropping my crust in the box. "You must've had a lot of fun in California."

Billy grinned, "This the part where you ask me how many girls I've fucked?"

"You really think I care?" I questioned, narrowing an eye in an expression.

"I think-" he leaned forward, his folded arms bracing against the table top. "-you're trying real hard not to."

"Well, you could ask me the same question," I shrugged.

A crooked smile broke out across his lips as he sat back in his seat. I didn't care if he knew how many guys I'd slept with—after tonight, he would know more about me than anyone in Hawkins, simply from the reason for this meetup. So, I sat there in my chair, and I didn't budge. There was no reason to look bothered.

Billy wiped his hands on a napkin and tossed it away. "Show me yours, I'll show you mine," he shook his head, still smiling like a genuine idiot. "Alright. I'll play. Your idea, you can go first."

My head tilted as I scoffed. It figured. It was the perfect way to get the information and conveniently ditch out before your turn. But, didn't I just say I didn't care? Sighing, I straightened my shoulders. "One. Your turn," I said, keeping my answer honest despite my nerves.

"One? Seriously? With the things they say about you at school, I gotta say—I expected a different answer," he replied, smoothly.

I nodded slowly, "Yeah. Everyone's made it out like I'm some five-cent trollop since the day I got here. I honestly couldn't tell you why. It's not like I sucked some guy's dick in class. Anyway, it's your turn."

"To be completely honest with you, I've lost count."

A chuckle bubbled out of me at the sheer irony of that answer. He shrugged, not making any apologies. I expected it to be along those lines, but I didn't think he'd actually say it—and hearing it out loud

was a lot different than knowing it in the back of my mind.

It was another reminder of what this was. And it calmed my fear of wanting to keep what I found. Because what I found was someone who liked being used as a sex toy. Just something to play with for one night and then move on from. There was no risk—he didn't want to be kept. I nodded, averting my eyes as I chuckled. "Predictable," I commented.

"So, when do I get to know why you actually left Denver?" Billy questioned, a bit interested as he dug into the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a lighter and then reached for a pack of cigarettes on the table beside the still open pizza box.

"It's really not an exciting story."

"You bein' all mysterious about it's gotta mean something."

Yes, it did, Billy. It meant I didn't want you to know. I didn't want anyone to know—because it was shameful and degrading. And everyone who knew refused to respect me after learning it. Well, all except Steve. Steve never seemed to care about what I'd done or who I was, and I was eternally grateful for that.

Though, Billy Hargrove was the opposite of Steve Harrington in almost every way. And a fear nagged at me deep in my stomach that his reaction would also be polar opposite. "I don't tell people..." I exhaled a shaky breath, tucking my hands into my lap where they began to fiddle with the ends of my shirt. "They don't want to be around me when they know."

"Jesus Christ. Did you murder someone?" Billy asked, raising an eyebrow as he breathed out a puff of smoke.

I shook my head, "No, I mean—"

"What could you have possibly done to get that kind of reaction?"

He was genuinely confused now, intrigue mixed in. My heart was racing in my chest, almost in the way you'd expect it to race if I had killed someone, and I gripped tightly to my shirt hem to hold my hands still. "I- I, um...I was an addict," I admitted.

The smoke from Billy's cigarette was an awkward reminder. I'd kept my eyes down, to the left—anywhere other than up. But I was too painfully curious not to search his eyes for a reaction, for the decision to get up and leave. "...and?" Billy said, expectantly. As though he was waiting for the other half of my confession.

"You don't understand, Billy—I started using when I was fifteen because my mom was in treatment. I was supposed to be there for her and for dad, but I was shooting up in the basement of my boyfriend's house," I forced the words out too quickly, causing them to spill from my lips like a geyser. "I was extremely high, wandering around the city when she died. My dad had to come find me and break the news after I came down."

Billy took a long drag from his cigarette and eyed the side of the pizza box, the lines of his face slack with a thoughtful expression. My hands were pulling at the hem of my shirt now. I swallowed hard and looked away, a bubble of nausea popping in the pit of my stomach.

Finally, after a long moment, I forced myself to look back. He wasn't getting up, he wasn't calling me despicable or disappointing. It was hard to tell just what he was thinking. I knew my hands were pulling at my shirt for a reason and, as much as I would've liked to ignore it, I also knew I couldn't. There was more to be said.

These things actually needed to be said, preferably before we were in a moment and them coming to light ruined it. So, with a deep breath, I continued speaking. "I'm only telling you this because you're going to want to know when you see later what I'm about to show you," I told him, the words pulling his eyes back to mine with a sparkle of curiosity. "My boyfriend was the reason I started using. He used the drugs to manipulate me, take advantage of me."

I swiveled slowly on the chair to turn away from him, facing the wall before I let my hands pull the shirt up over my head. Holding the fabric tightly to my chest with one hand, I used the other to move my hair over my shoulder. "He'd get me high, get off, and put out his cigarettes on my back," I explained, slowly, quietly.

My voice was too small—it felt like I wasn't speaking. But that was the blood rushing, my heart heart thumping loudly, drowning out

any other sound. "Tell me this motherfucker paid for that," Billy's voice was cold, like hard steel, but it was low like a growl. I winced. Adam never received any punishment for what happened in Denver. What could he be punished for? The same things I was doing? I'd begged my father not to touch him. Nothing good would've come out of that, and I would only feel more ashamed.

Hanging my head, I sighed, "I can't."

"Goddammit, Bets," a scuffling, a thud caused my torso to twist so I could see behind me. Billy had stood from his chair and now took steps away. After a pace, he turned back toward me with an accusatory expression, "You just let him get away with that shit?"

"What was I supposed to do? There was no way to get him in trouble without getting me in trouble, too."

"What about your old man? He didn't think to beat the shit out of this prick?"

"No, Billy! Nothing happened," I stood, frustrated. "My dad doesn't even know about this. You were going to see them tonight, anyway, so I told you—that's it. I don't want your pity, okay?"

He stood still, staring at me with a disbelieving, disapproving and downright feral look as his fists tightened where they hung at his sides. My voice was angry, but I was shaking. On one hand, it was nice to know his reaction didn't involve shaming me. On the other, I'd almost rather have that reaction than this one. I didn't tell him this to make him care.

I didn't want him to care. I wanted to warn him, prepare him, and that was my only intention. Though, something odd I noticed in the moments of silence that followed was the lack of a cigarette in his hand. My eyes flicked toward the table, to the ashtray on the window sill beside it, in search for it. Sure enough, it was there.

A single stream of smoking fading from the air above. Why would he put it out? He just lit it. It occurred to me that I'd just told him my ex would put out his cigarettes on me, but I didn't dare draw a correlation. This needed to stop. "Billy, please, can we just forget it?"

I asked, exhaling.

He sighed heavily through his nose and averted his eyes, his features calming as his fists remained tight. For a moment, there was more silence. And I awkwardly stood there, hands shaking, shifting my weight from foot to foot in anticipation. Finally, Billy looked at me. I held my breath as I saw them again—the words spoken through his gaze. But they weren't spoken, they were screamed, and the pull in my gut to open my chest returned.

Why did he have to do this to me? Why couldn't this just be easy? Why couldn't I have him and not feel like I've loved him? Suddenly the anxiousness, the nerves, weren't from fear. They were the product of an unspeakable urge to move. To reach out, to touch him, to feel him. It was so strong it left an ache in my ribs.

This was so incredibly pointless, I left myself no choice but to let it all go. So, I did. I moved quickly forward, taking his face in my hands, our chests bumping as our lips collided. His hands started at my hips and slid up my back, a hand between my shoulder blades holding me there against him. Our mouths were open as they devoured each other.

Fresh nicotine flavored his tongue but I let it in, allowing the taste to take me back to that night outside my house. The same desire, the same addiction, rushed through my veins—but it was different this time. This time I wasn't drunk. I could feel the full force of his skin beneath my hands, the warmth of his hands on my back.

My hands slipped from his face, instead moving to the open folds of his shirt. I gripped fistfuls of the fabric and pulled as I took steps backward. We shuffled toward the bed amongst the frantic smacking of lips until the backs of my knees bumped the frame. Billy's hands moved to my shoulders, giving a gentle push, following me down as my back touched the motel bed sheets.

We parted, but I couldn't look away from his eyes. They held mine while he discarded his shirt, tossing it somewhere off the end of the bed, and then reached for my jeans. His fingers unbuttoned the denim as he dipped down, pressing his lips to the front of my neck. I couldn't help but lose my hands in his curls. Tipping my head back, a

breathy moan slipped from my lips.

He placed warm, wet kisses down the length of my throat before tugging my jeans down my legs. I instinctively lifted my hips to aid in removing them and he sat back to pull them off my ankles, throwing them aside. My chest heaved, but so did his—and I shivered at the sight of his hungry eyes sliding over my body.

"Shit, Bets," he huffed, before moving forward. He hovered over me, lowering his body on top of mine. "You're so fucking beautiful."

Billy's mouth swallowed mine in a lustful kiss and, for a moment, I genuinely could not breathe. There was something about the way he said it that was so needy, yet so gruff, that made my stomach roll somersaults. I told myself this was what I asked for. I wanted to feel like this, to feel this pleasure, and once I had it I would move on.

There was no need to dwell on it—I was never going to do this again. But, since it was one time, I could give into it and enjoy the one time I did have. I thought this just as the sensation of his hand following the line of my body caught my attention, traveling straight to my hips. He slipped beneath the hem of my underwear and rubbed over my folds. The kiss only broke because I gasped, arms wrapping around his shoulders as his mouth went to my neck.

He stroked me a moment before pressing two fingers, sliding them inside me. I was moaning, moving my own legs apart, as he began to pump his fingers. Waves of pleasure rolled over me and my stomach felt tight. This was what I wanted. I wanted something I could lose myself in—and I was getting it. Goddamn, was I getting it.

After a moment, the pacing changed, and the rhythm was gaining speed. Moans and whimpers fell from my lips that I didn't even try to stop. "Fuck, Billy," my hips bucked up into his hand—I was falling apart. "I'm getting closer."

"Just relax, Bets. Let it go."

That stupid nickname somehow felt like fire in my stomach, tightening the knot already pulled taut, and I knew it was going to snap soon. It was like walking on a tightrope. Wanting to feel more

but knowing, if you do, you'll break down.

Billy pulled back then, shuffling backward on the bed to position himself between my thighs, chest against the mattress. My fingers gripped fistfuls of the sheets and I moaned rather loudly as his tongue met my folds, sliding between them. His fingers still pumped back and forth, adding to the sensations of his tongue, and my eyes squeezed shut.

If I didn't, I was going to see stars. It didn't seem like much but it was just enough to cut the rope I treaded cautiously. Toes curling, tightening my grip on my sheets, back arching off the mattress as a series of moans poured from my mouth. Ecstasy pulsed through my body and Billy lapped up anything that came from it.

My chest heaved quickly as I began to come down. Billy sat up, a shit-eating grin on his lips, and he crawled forward to hover over me again as I opened my eyes. "How was that, angel?" he asked, before catching my lips between his in a brief, but lustful kiss.

"Perfect," I answered, struggling for a breath as he pulled away. "Do you have a condom?"

"Wouldn't invite you in without one."

"Good. Put it on."

He smirked as he sat back to unbuckle his belt, "Yes, ma'am."

I felt fire in my cheeks but I didn't care. The high was only slightly faded, yet I was missing it enough to ache. My rib cage felt hollow and I craved him like I craved air in that moment—and it was giving me confidence I wouldn't dream of having without it.

My stomach knotted up as Billy took his jeans off, grabbing the condom out of the back packet. Heat rushed my cheeks and I realized something. I wasn't completely naked yet. It seemed unfair, to expect to view his body without letting him view mine. Like an exchange of vulnerability. You show me yours, I'll show you mine.

So I stuffed a hand under my back, arching up off the bed to better fit, and unclasped my bra. The straps fell down my arms and I gave

the contraption a toss toward the end of the bed. I didn't wait to see where it landed. My eyes turned back to Billy as I tugged off my soaked underwear..

He sat back, watching me, eyes fixated on my movements as his jaw hung slack. There was hunger in those stormy blues. "I'm dreaming," he huffed a chuckle, wearing a lopsided smirk.

"You're living," I pushed myself upright, sliding my hands on his face as our noses brushed. "Live with me, Billy. Just for tonight."

The tension, thick like concrete, pressed down on my chest. It made it even harder to breathe than it already was. But, in a way, it made it feel so much better. Our lips brush, the pads of my thumb tracing his cheek bones. It was a small kiss but the second was deeper and open-mouthed.

I could feel him lean into me, but there was no definite push—almost as if he was waiting for an invitation. The thought was nice, though I doubted that to be the case. Either way, I took it upon myself, tugging him toward me as I leaned back into the bed. He followed me down and our chests pressed as every inch of our bodies collided.

I'd almost forgotten what that felt like, to have so much skin touching yours at once. It was warm and exhilarating and I almost felt dizzy. His erection was a hard length between my thighs and I involuntarily shivered. After a second, Billy pulled back, moving away only to roll the condom on and position himself.

"Ready for this?" he asked, as his tip nudged my core.

Swallowing hard, I nodded, "Yes."

He eased himself in with a strangled groan and my head tipped back, mouth falling open. The moan that came out of me was barely audible, cut off from the oxygen being forced out of my lungs, and I sucked in a breath once he bottomed out.

As he moved in, he lowered back down and kissed my lips once more before decorating my neck. "I'm gonna take care of you," Billy whispered, his hot breath fanning against my ear. In a sense, I could

see that line being a turn on because of the suggestion that what came next was going to be insanely pleasurable.

Though, it almost felt like a reassurance. And some part of my brain wondered if he'd only said it because of what I told him about my past lover. How he was rough and took advantage of me. The thought was comforting, and sweet, but it was hotter for that reason alone.

My tongue slipped out to wet my lips, "I trust you."

It sounded like I meant it, but did I? Did I actually trust this madman about to fuck me senseless, or was I playing along to enhance the experience? I honestly didn't know. Every part of this was out of character for me. At least, not recent character. I didn't do hookups, meetups, and make-outs. That wasn't me since we left Denver two years ago.

This was totally new territory for me now, in Hawkins. I knew I was ruining this second chance, the one chance my father gave me, the moment I walked in the door. Maybe that was really why I was so nervous? Any rational thought dissipated the moment Billy's hips started moving.

His tempo was slow, but every thrust was deep enough to turn my stomach. I slid my hands up into his curls and wound my fingers in fistfuls as my eyes instinctively squeezed shut, head tossed back against the mattress. Uncontrollable moans escaped me—and I didn't bother trying to hold them in.

They mixed with the heavy breathing and Billy's throaty grunts and groans. The motel room was filled with them, and I was sure the neighboring room could hear them, too. "Billy..." I whimpered, gripping onto him tightly. "Fuck. Don't stop."

"I won't, Bets."

His pace quickened a little as his lips moved to my chest, teeth nipping at my collar bones before peppering the skin with small kisses. There was certain to be bruises left where his fingers dug into my hips. But I didn't mind the idea. After all, he was probably leaving marks all over me already.

At least these marks were welcome. Every sensation was a touch to the pool in my stomach, sending tidal rings of pleasure across my body. I could feel that tightening again. It was going to happen soon. "Billy! Holy shit...Billy, I'm gonna cum," I found the words coming out before they were planned.

Billy groaned against my neck, kisses moving up my jaw, "I wanna hear you. Scream for me, Betsy."

Anything in me that would want to protest fell silent. I was too close to another high to mess it up. The loud, rolling moans that came from my mouth didn't sound like my voice. Then again, I hadn't had sex in over a year. I'd become unfamiliar with that part of myself.

Still, when I was finally coming undone, I could feel deep in my stomach. I opened my mouth to say so, but was cut off by my own voice, calling his name as my arms clamped around Billy's shoulders. It hit me again—those warm waves of ecstasy—and every inch of me was trembling.

Billy came a moment later, obscenities flowing like water. His face dropped into my shoulder and I felt his nose nuzzle into my neck as the heavy, labored breathing was all that remained in my ears. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to let go.

My heart was calming down as I caught my breath against his weight, and I found myself running my fingers through his hair, sliding my hand along his slick shoulder blades. "How was it?" Billy asked, before pressing his lips to the side of my neck.

"Perfect," I repeated the word, softer, quieter this time.

Finally, he pushed himself up on his arms, hovering over me. There was something gentle to the energy in his eyes. Something worn and tired. He stared at me for a moment and I didn't have the heart to interrupt him. Instead, I patiently waited for him to speak.

With a soft chuckle, he wiped away the strands of hair stuck to the side of my face with sweat, "Wanna watch that movie?"

"Depends. What is it?"

"Flashdance."

I eyed the lopsided grin that came to his face a second but I couldn't keep the corners of my mouth down for much longer. "Flashdance?" I asked, rhetorically, and he nodded. "You remembered that, huh?"

"I figured we never got to watch it at your place—why not watch it here, just us?" he smiled, that warm smile from before, and giggles bubbled up from my chest. It did something to that shade of blue, made it brighter and softer at the same time, all the while much warmer than I was used to.

Nodding, I smiled back, "Okay."

He surprised me with a peck to my cheek before he rolled off of me, sliding off the bed to stand. I didn't know what to expect beforehand, but I really didn't know what to expect after. How was I supposed to act? Friendly? Or like it never happened? He wasn't kicking me out, so I assumed friendly was a safe bet.

Billy put his jeans back on and sauntered to the little TV across the room from the bed. I pushed myself up into a sitting position, eyes searching for my clothes. There were fresh clothes in my car, I knew, in a bag I'd brought but didn't think important to bring in.

In my nervousness leading up to this, I didn't know if I should bring it in. "Billy?" I pulled my knees to my chest, draping my arms over them. He turned almost immediately with an eyebrow raised in question. So I continued, "Would you mind running out to my car? I left my bag in the backseat."

"Got the keys?"

I nodded as my hand dove for the crumpled heap of denim beside the bed that was my jeans. "Here," I said, fishing the keys from my back pocket. He took them from my outstretched hand and sauntered over to the table, tugging his jacket off the back of his chair.

He was outside a second later, and I could finally feel myself breathe. When he returned with my bag, I dug out my set of spare clothes—cotton shorts and an oversized shirt—and got dressed. Billy put a

VHS in the player and I crawled up the bed to sit against the headboard.

The opening of the movie began to play as he settled in to my right. I slid my feet beneath the blanket and sunk down, pulling it over my chest. "You cold, Bets?" Billy asked, humor in his voice.

I smiled a little, watching the TV. The less I looked at him, the less this feeling could continue—and the less I could want it to stay. "A bit," I replied.

"I'm right here."

"It's okay—I'm fine."

"Y'know, this whole stubborn routine was hot at first," Billy said, getting up. My eyes followed him as he stood up from the bed and pulled away the blanket, before stepping back in and getting settled. "It's still hot—just fucking annoying."

He sidled up to me and I tossed my eyes at his words, but heat rushed to my cheeks quicker than they ever had. His arm lifted up, as if going to drape it around my shoulders, but he held it up as his other hand made a gesture toward himself.

Sighing, I inched closer, and snuggled against his side. Billy let his arm fall around my shoulders then, his hand resting just above my hip. "Thank you," I mumbled, trying to refocus on the movie. He'd said some kind of 'your welcome' but I was, admittedly, nodding off. Every muscle in my body felt like I'd been clenching them for hours.

My body, brain, and heart were tired. So, it wasn't very surprising when I was too sleepy to hold up my head and instead rested it on Billy's chest unprompted. I had to remind myself that I was being friendly. It was okay to be unguarded here. His hand gently squeezed my hip, thumb massaging through the cotton of my shorts. I felt him shift a second before his lips touched my forehead.

I told myself it was all apart of the experience, apart of the show, as my fingers drew drunken lines on his exposed abdomen. Fake or not—it was nice. My eyelids were so heavy. But, still, I tried to keep

watching. I tried to stay with him just a little longer. "Get some sleep, Betsy," Billy spoke softly, so close to my ear.

Sleepily, I asked, "When do I have to leave?"

"Stay as long as you want," he answered. Half-asleep, I didn't question it. Instead, I let my eyelids drop, giving into the strong urge from their heavy weight. Falling into his comfortable warmth, gentle touches, and inviting kisses. And somewhere after that, I drifted off.